

## Trusting God in Trying Times

Psalm 56

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I've shared this true story on Facebook before. I may have also shared it in a sermon, but it bears repeating. Over 15 years ago, on a Saturday night as I was preparing to get my much-needed beauty rest, I heard a clarion call to come to the kitchen immediately.

When I arrived, I saw Beth scrubbing something off the floor as she kept looking up towards the ceiling. She told me to look up, but I didn't see anything. Then, she pointed to the ceiling fan and I saw something that made me scream, in a manly sort of way. There, perched on one of the blades was a mourning dove! And then it hit me why Beth was cleaning up the floor.

I was just about to ask her why she hadn't captured the bird when all five women in my family declared in unison, "*Get it out of here. You're the man of the house!*" I carefully studied the situation while the ladies kept telling me to do something. I finally grabbed a chair to stand on, and with an old tablecloth in my hand, I dove at the dove. I missed and he started flying around the kitchen, sending all six of us running for cover.

The resulting chaos and confusion could have won us something on America's Funniest Videos. Actually, one of our daughters did take a video but I deleted it so it could not be used against me.

This dodgy dove made it into our laundry room and we quickly shut the door so he couldn't escape. As I tiptoed toward him, I saw that he had perched on my Packers hat! This was now war – I wanted to give this mourning dove something to mourn about. As I tried to strangle him, he flew around some more and finally ended up behind our dryer.

When Beth realized that I couldn't capture this winged rat on my own, she helped me move the dryer so we could put a large bowl over him. With the help of our oldest daughter, we were able to secure the foul fowl, and took him outside where we set him free. I smiled as he flew into our neighbor's yard to torment them. I'm surprised we didn't catch the bird flu from this despicable dove.

The mourning dove gets its name from its distinctive call, a soft, sorrowful cooing. Early settlers and naturalists thought the dove's low, plaintive sounds resembled someone weeping or expressing grief. This led them to associate the bird with mourning, hence the name.

→ **Play audio sounds.**

There's something soulful and somber about these doves, isn't there? As we come to Psalm 56 in our Summer in the Psalms series, we will see that David did a lot of mourning as he expressed his fears and tears for many years. Like most of the Psalms, this one comes with a heading: **"TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO THE DOVE ON FAR-OFF TEREBINTHS. A MIKTAM OF DAVID, WHEN THE PHILISTINES SEIZED HIM IN GATH."**

This Psalm was written to be sung according to the "dove on far-off terebinths." A terebinth was a large tree, under which people would gather. Some believe this Psalm reflects a dove who is in distress, maybe not perched on a ceiling fan, but mourning for some reason. David can relate to this dove in trouble.

The word "miktam" means, "golden" or "hidden," meaning it's worth digging in to uncover its treasure. Like Psalm 34, the setting is when David was being chased by Saul and by the Philistines. Feeling like an ensnared dove, David expressed his thoughts and feelings in Psalm 56.

Let's read it together.

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

After pouring over this passage, a phrase from a hymn kept coming to my mind, which serves as the main idea of this Psalm: *Trust and obey, for there's no other way.*

I see three ways we can trust God in trying times.

**1. Since God is with me when I worry, I will trust Him with my fears (1-7).** In verses 1-2, we see that David is filled with fear and worry: ***“Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly.”*** The word ***“trample”*** is used twice and refers to the panting of a raging beast out to crush its prey.

David feels beaten down, oppressed, and crushed. He's alone and outnumbered. Notice these attacks are continuous and relentless as they happen ***“all day long.”*** This phrase is used twice in verse 1 and again in verse 5. In verse 6, these enemies ***“lurk,”*** which means they were always around, looking to pounce on him. Psalm 71:10 says, ***“For my enemies speak concerning me; those who watch for my life consult together.”***

Are you wrestling with worry today? Does it feel like enemies are ceaselessly stalking you? Is fear filling your mind and causing anxiety?

Let's learn from David's response in verses 3-4: ***“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?”*** I find it refreshing how David mentions the word ***“when,”*** not ***“if,”*** to show it's common to be afraid. At the same time, David says, ***“I put my trust in you.”***

I'm reminded of an old Steve Green worship song which our daughters liked singing when they were young, and now they're teaching it to their children. They were probably singing it when the dove was dive-bombing us in the kitchen that Saturday night. The lyrics come right from Psalm 56:

*When I am afraid, I will trust in you,  
I will trust in you,  
I will trust in you.  
When I am afraid, I will trust in you,  
in God whose word I praise.*

It's normal to experience two reactions which seem to pull in opposite directions, yet often exist side by side. You may feel fear rising even as faith holds you steady. Spurgeon writes, *"It is possible, then, for fear and faith to occupy the mind at the same moment."* You may carry deep pain while still lifting up praise. You may walk through trials yet cling to trust. You may weep with raw grief while also resting in real hope. You may wrestle with unbelief even as you choose to believe. These tensions are not signs of weakness, but evidence of the complex, honest faith journey we're called to take. I find encouragement from the response of the dad who said to Jesus in Mark 9:24: ***"I believe; help my unbelief."***

It's tempting to quote cliches to people when they're going through hard times. Here are some that come to mind.

*"God helps those who help themselves."*  
*"God won't give you more than you can handle."*  
*"I'm too blessed to be stressed."*  
*"Name it and claim it."*  
*"Just have more faith."*  
*"Fear is the opposite of faith."*

Faith is not the absence of fear; it is the confidence that God is greater than my fears.

Jerry Sittser, who lost his mother, his wife, and a child in a car crash, wrote a book called *A Grace Disguised*. Here's something he learned: *"I see now that my faith was becoming an ally rather than an enemy because I could vent anger freely, even toward God, without fearing retribution."*

While it's healthy to acknowledge our anger, and describe our doubts, David refuses to remain paralyzed by them. In the middle of verse 4, he makes a bold declaration: ***"I shall not be afraid."*** So, here's a question: How does he move from ***"when I am afraid"*** to ***"I shall not be afraid"***? Let's dive a bit deeper for the answer.

- **Trust in God.** In verse 3, David makes a deliberate decision: ***"I put my trust in you."*** In verse 4, he says it again: ***"in God I trust."***
- **Believe God's Word.** Verse 4 begins: ***"In God, whose word I praise."*** We must believe God's Word, even when our emotions or circumstances are saying something else.

- **Surrender to God’s sovereignty.** Because David knew God was in charge, he was able to make this statement in verse 4: ***“What can flesh do to me?”*** Nothing could happen to him unless God allowed it.

In other words, *trust and obey, for there’s no other way.*

The first thing we learn is this: **Since God is with me when I worry, I will trust Him with my fears (1-7).**

**2. Since God is for me when I weep, I will trust Him with my tears.** We see this in verse 8: ***“You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?”*** I like how one paraphrase captures God’s intimate care and concern for us: *“You’ve kept track of my every toss and turn through the sleepless nights, each tear entered in your ledger, each ache written in your book.”* To **“count”** means God numbers and tracks all those nights we weep and can’t sleep.

The word **“tossings”** can also be translated as **“wanderings,”** meaning God knows when we walk away from Him. As the hunted fugitive, the knowledge that God knew David’s every step was very comforting to him. Psalm 121:8 says, ***“The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.”*** Matthew 10:30-31 says, ***“But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”***

I love this tender picture of how God collects and saves our tears: ***“...put my tears in your bottle.”*** Many passages mention weeping and tears. Here are 10 of them.

- 1 Samuel 1:10: ***“She [Hannah] was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly.”***
- Job 16:16: ***“My face is red with weeping, and on my eyelids is deep darkness.”***
- Job 16:20: ***“My friends scorn me; my eye pours out tears to God.”***
- Psalm 6:6: ***“I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping.”***
- Psalm 39:12: ***“Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; hold not your peace at my tears!”***
- Psalm 42:3: ***“My tears have been my food day and night...”***
- Psalm 69:3: ***“I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.”***

- Psalm 88:9: “...my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you.”
- Lamentations 2:18: “...Let tears stream down like a torrent day and night!”
- Lamentations 3:49: “My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite.”

God designed our tears with purpose. They wash away stress from our souls, soothe our heart by releasing healing endorphins, and shield and refresh our eyes. And beyond the benefit to our bodies, our tears speak a silent language that tells others we are hurting and in need of comfort.

Recently, my wife Beth was given a book called, “Every Moment Holy” by Douglas Kaine McKelvey. This has helped us understand what her mom is going through as she grieves the death of her husband. Listen to “A Liturgy for the Loss of a Spouse.”

*O Christ, your joyful union with your bride is the deep mystery toward which all our earthly marriages portend. Therefore, deal tenderly with me now as I find myself alone here at the end of this precious union with my spouse. In marriage, the two of us had become one. Now one of us is gone. And I do not feel as if, by this loss, I have simply been reduced to one again, but as if I were now some ragged half, the salvaged piece of a thing torn asunder.*

*This is a grief like no other, O Lord, for we were companions in a holy bond, our hearts and lives knit together, sharing purpose and plan, sharing days and nights and dreams, hands clasped in a common pilgrimage. Together we were becoming what neither of us could have been alone. Our vow to love within Your greater love was remaking us into a new thing, as we each sought in grace to learn to prize and serve one another.*

*And now, our grand experiment has reached its sudden earthly end. It seems so unreal, and beyond all reasonable reckoning, to comprehend that my closest friend and ally has vanished from the world. I am unmoored and adrift in these spaces we so recently shared.*

*Give grace, O God of love and hope.  
Give grace, O God of mercy and sympathy.  
Give grace, O God who knows my heart, my shock, my grief, my loss.  
Give grace, O God who grieves for me, who shelters me, who weeps with me.*

*Give comfort to Your sorrowing child, and to all others who find themselves dismayed by this same alien loneliness – disoriented by the sudden inrush of silence at the end of a marriage.*

*This is an anguish multiplied by the fact that I have lost the companion I would have shared such sadness with.*

*Be present, O God, in the emptiness.*

*Be present, O God, in the silence.*

*Be present, O God, in the aching heart of this new and solitary sorrow.*

*Amen.*

As I read this, my mind went to Psalm 68:5 in the HCSB where God is described as the “***Champion of widows.***”

In ancient times, tears were sometimes collected in wineskins, small vials, or bottles. This metaphor shows God honors and remembers your suffering. He not only sees your tears; He also cherishes them as too precious to let fall to the ground. What does God keep our tears for? One pastor answers: “*To show how precious they are in His sight, and perhaps to suggest they are preserved for a future use.*” On top of that, your tears are not just collected, but also recorded, as if in a book of remembrance, signifying their sacred significance to the Almighty.

Not a single tear you’ve shed has gone unnoticed; whether it spilled out of your eyes when you were a newborn, when you broke your arm at five, when your heart was broken at sixteen, when you lost your grandpa, or when you became a widow or widower. God is both a tear-catcher and a burden-bearer. He keeps record of every tear because He cares deeply for you.

Q: Have you ever had a restless night?

A: God counts your tossings.

Q: Do you sometimes cry into your pillow?

A: God treasures your tears.

Q: Does it feel like no one notices your pain?

A: God records your trials in His book.

Malachi 3:16 says God has a “**book of remembrance.**” Not one of your fears is ignored and none of your tears are wasted. Check out these tender words from God to Hezekiah in 2 Kings 20:5: “...***I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears.***”

In her book, *Jesus and Women*, Kristi McClelland gives some insight into how tears were collected in a bottle during the time David wrote this psalm, which was 1,000 years before Christ. Some Jewish women took this passage to heart and carried a tear jar or wineskin to use in their worship times. They would literally collect their tears and then pour them out before the Lord because He can hold all sadness, grief, sorrow, hurt, and pain.

According to a website she referenced, tear bottles were common around the time of Christ, when mourners filled them with tears and placed them in tombs as symbols of respect. Sometimes women were even paid to cry into these vessels. Legend has it that those who produced the most tears received the most compensation. The more tears, the more important the deceased person was perceived to be.

Tear bottles reappeared during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when those mourning the loss of loved ones would collect their tears in bottles. When the tears had evaporated, the mourning period would end. In some Civil War stories, women were said to have cried into tear bottles and saved them until their husbands returned from battle. Their collected tears would show the men how much they were adored and missed.

I appreciated Kristi McClelland’s understanding of the woman in Luke 7. She believes she could have brought two jars to the dinner with Jesus at the home of Simon the Pharisee – two jars for two very different reasons: “*I think she brought an alabaster jar of expensive perfume to anoint Jesus and a tear jar to pour out her sorrows to Him. In this act of worship...Jesus could handle both, a mixture of anointing oil and woman’s deepest pain poured out in her tears. We can pour our whole hearts to Jesus. We leave it all before Him. We can cast it all upon Him. He can take it, and He wants to take it.*”

Friend, even if foes are chasing you down, and you feel like no one knows you are crying, God is for you! Check out the last phrase of Psalms 56:9: “***This I know, that God is for me.***” This truth will help when your tears are flowing down your face. I think the Apostle Paul had this verse in mind when he wrote Romans 8:31: “***What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?***” Psalms 118:6 says, “***The Lord is on my side; I will not fear.***”

I reached out to Larry Wilson this week because I know he loves Psalm 56. I asked him what verse impacts him the most. Here's his answer: *“Lori and I talked this Psalm through. Begin in verse 9, **“For this I know, that God is for me.”** Now, read the entire Psalm with this in mind. Likened it to a boxing ring. God is in your corner. When you're beat down and need rest from anything that can be considered an enemy, God is there to wipe up the blood, to mop your brow, to heal your cuts, and encourage your next move. God is rooting for you. He is in your corner. He is your advocate. He is for you!”*

Here are some insights I've learned about grief which have helped me personally and pastorally. I typed them out for my sister and brother-in-law after their son Alex died unexpectedly three years ago. Perhaps you'll find them helpful as well (I've shared them before, but they bear repeating).

1. Grief is very personal – don't look down on someone who grieves differently than you.
2. Don't feel embarrassed when you cry and don't feel guilty when you laugh at a funny memory – it's all part of honoring your loved one.
3. Expect grief to ambush you – tears can be triggered by a smell, a taste, a song, a season of the year, an anniversary, a memory, or anything else.
4. The stages of grief are not clean – you'll cycle between denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. And then you may start all over again. It's all normal.
5. You won't get “over” your loved one's death, but you will get through it – if you lean on the Lord for His help.
6. Don't isolate – talk it out – and get help if you need it. I recommend DivorceCare and GriefShare. They both start again on Sunday, September 7 at 2:00 pm. On this week's 4G podcast, we interviewed Todd Stanger about DivorceCare and Roxanne Daugherty about GriefShare. Our Alzheimer's Support Group, led by Marcy Kongkousonh, meets the last Sunday afternoon of the month.
7. If you don't have a gospel-preaching church, find one – and get plugged in. I know of a church I could recommend.
8. Talk about your loved one in the weeks, months, and years to come – it's good, even if it makes you cry. You honor his or her memory when you share memories.
9. People will inadvertently say stupid things when they're trying to comfort you – give grace to them when they try to package your pain with empty cliches.

10. When you're struggling, turn to Scripture – I recommend the Book of Psalms. Psalm 34:18 says, ***“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”***

For sure, grief is raw. But for the believer, our hope is also real. We can grieve with hope because Jesus has defeated death, the devil, and our depravity through His substitutionary death and triumphant resurrection from the dead. 2 Timothy 1:10 says Jesus ***“abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”***

Revelation 21:4 tells us a day is coming when, ***“He 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.”*** John Bunyan writes, *“God preserves our tears in a bottle, so that He can wipe them away.”* Matthew Henry says, *“The tears of God’s persecuted people are bottled up, and sealed among God’s treasures.”*

Let’s summarize what we’ve learned so far.

- 1. Since God is with me when I worry, I will trust Him with my fears.**
- 2. Since God is for me when I weep, I will trust Him with my tears.**

*Let’s trust and obey, for there’s no other way.*

**3. Since God is worshipped when I walk with Him, I will trust Him with my years.** In verse 10, David reiterates the importance of praising God’s Word: ***“In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise.”*** The word ***“praise”*** means to, *“shout or boast.”* We’re to shout out how much we love the Scriptures because they proclaim God’s attributes and His actions.

Verse 11 shows us how this leads to trust, which helps us not to be terrified: ***“In God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?”*** In verse 12, David commits to obey by fulfilling his vows to God: ***“I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you.”*** David saw it as a matter of obedience to gather with God’s people and to give an offering to Him. Psalm 76:11 says, ***“Make your vows to the Lord your God and perform them.”***

In verse 13, we see how David was so thankful for his deliverance that he worshipped God by walking with Him: ***“For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.”***

We know that David walked with God for the rest of his life, and as Acts 13:36 says, he ***“served the purpose of God in his own generation.”***

That’s what struck me in the baptism testimonies last Sunday afternoon when 14 people were baptized. Recent High School grad Logan Russell testified of his deliverance when he said, *“I was lost, lonely, and sad. My grandparents and Edgewood programs like Awana led me closer to Christ. And then, when reading the Bible with my mom, I repented and accepted Christ. Now, I have hope, peace, and a secure future...I’ve been saved for 10 years and there’s no excuse to not get baptized other than my selfishness. So, I said to myself, ‘Why not? I’m just going to get it done!’”*

While Psalm 56 is not considered to be messianic, I see a strong reference to Jesus in the last four words of verse 13: ***“the light of life.”*** Listen to the words of Jesus found in John 8:12: ***“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”***

After our team time this week, I went out into the parking lot to introduce myself to the guys who were grinding the old yellow lines off the concrete. We’re having this done so we can reconfigure our lot to create more spaces, especially some additional accessible ones, for a total of 24. We’ll also be adding on to the south parking lot for an additional 49 regular spaces.

When I asked one of the guys how things were going, he said, *“Terrible. The machine isn’t working right.”* I empathized with him and then he asked if I was a pastor. I told him I was, and he asked if he could talk to me. We came into the café area, and I listened to him talk and cry about some horrible things going on in his life. I shared some verses with him and told him that God catches all his tears in a bottle. This made him cry some more and then he said, *“I’m filled with anger and bitterness...I need to be saved because I don’t think I am.”*

After I walked him through the gospel, he took off his white hard hat, bowed his head, surrendered, and prayed to receive Christ as his Lord and Savior! We exchanged numbers and I gave him Anchor for the Soul, Ready or Not, and a couple sermon CDs.

Please pray for him. His name is Juan. I connected with him again on Wednesday afternoon and he told me he had read the first three chapters of Anchor. He also enjoyed some pulled pork and fresh sweet corn at the EdgeMen BBQ.

If you've been mourning or on the move because you feel like you're being chased by relentless enemies, you have a choice. You can go through your fears and tears without God and it will be horrible. Or, you can go through it with God, and it will be hard, but He will be with you because He's for you! It's time to trust and obey, for there's no other way.

*“Lord Jesus, for too long I've kept You out of my life. I admit that I am a sinner and that I cannot save myself. I repent of my sins by changing my mind about the way I've been living. Please forgive me, a sinner. In the midst of all my fears and my tears, I choose right now to trust and obey You. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for coming to earth. With all my heart I believe You are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank You for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe Your words are true and I now receive You into my life. I repent from the way I've been living. Be my Savior and Lord. I surrender to Your leadership in my life. Make me into the person You want me to be. In Jesus' Name. Amen.”*

### **Invitation Song: “Trust and Obey”**

When we walk with the Lord  
in the light of his word,  
what a glory he sheds on our way!  
While we do his good will,  
he abides with us still,  
and with all who will trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there's no other way  
to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

Not a burden we bear,  
not a sorrow we share,  
but our toil he doth richly repay;  
not a grief or a loss,  
not a frown or a cross,  
but is blest if we trust and obey.

But we never can prove  
the delights of his love  
until all on the altar we lay;  
for the favor he shows,

for the joy he bestows,  
are for them who will trust and obey.

Then in fellowship sweet  
we will sit at his feet,  
or we'll walk by his side in the way;  
what he says we will do,  
where he sends, we will go;  
never fear, only trust and obey.