

When I Am Afraid

Psalm 56 | Pastor Jason Van Bommel

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

⁵⁶ 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.

Introduction: What Makes You Afraid? Why?

What are you afraid of? According to the American Psychiatric Association, the most common phobias in America are –

1. **Arachnophobia** – the fear of spiders. There is no escape from these eight-legged beasts. They live in our houses, gardens, and even our places of work. True arachnophobes are even scared of pictures of spiders.

2. **Social phobia** – the fear of social situations. More than simple shyness. This is an extreme fear of being scrutinized by others, or humiliated by one's own actions. This is usually where the fear of public speaking falls.

3. **Aerophobia** – the fear of flying. In a plane, obviously. Often paired with claustrophobia.

4. **Agoraphobia** – the fear of inescapable situations. The result is anxiety and panic attacks, which can easily become self-perpetuating. Extreme agoraphobes are confined to their own home, which is the only place they consider to be safe.

5. **Claustrophobia** – the fear of confined spaces. Sufferers will stay well away from elevators, trains and tiny cupboards under the stairs. May cause panic attacks if escape is not possible.

6. **Acrophobia** – the fear of heights. Sufferers may have panic attacks and put themselves in genuine danger if they can't get down. Often confused with vertigo – which is merely a dizzy or spinning sensation and not necessarily caused by heights.

There's also a new phobia on the rise, according to British researchers:

Nomophobia is the fear of being out of mobile phone contact. The term, an abbreviation for “**no–mobile-phone phobia**,” was coined during a study to look at anxieties suffered by mobile phone users.

But, of course, you can be afraid without having a phobia. A 2015 survey by Chapman University found these general fears most common:

Here were the top 10 fears for 2015:

- Corruption of government officials (58.0%)
- Cyber-terrorism (44.8%)
- Corporate tracking of personal information (44.6%)
- Terrorist attacks (44.4%)
- Government tracking of personal information (41.4%)
- Bio-warfare (40.9%)
- Identity theft (39.6%)
- Economic collapse (39.2%)
- Running out of money in the future (37.4%)
- Credit card fraud (36.9%)

If you consider the fact that the #2 phobia in America is a fear of social situations and that the top 7 common non-phobia fears all have to do with something someone else might do to you, it seems that the most common source of fear for people is other people. The Bible calls this “the fear of man,” and Proverbs 29:25 says, “*The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe.*”

Psalms 56, along with Psalm 27, are the go-to psalms for dealing with the fear of man, so that will be our primary focus as we work our way through this psalm this morning.

A. David is Finally Afraid

from slandered to surrounded to seized

In the psalms we've read so far this summer, we're following David a path of rejection and alienation. In Psalm 7, we saw him slandered by Cush the Benjaminite. In Psalm 59, we saw him surrounded by wicked men, sent by Saul to watch his house that Saul may kill him. Now, David has fled out of Israel altogether and has actually fled to Gath, where he has been seized by Philistines.

This incident in David's life is told in Samuel 21. David, on the run from Saul, had stopped into see Ahimelech the priest. While there, he saw Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul's herdsmen. David had no weapon with him, so Ahimelech gave him the sword of Goliath. David took that excellent sword and then we read what happened next in 1 Samuel 21:10-15:

¹⁰ And David rose and fled that day from Saul and went to Achish the king of Gath. ¹¹ And the servants of Achish said to him, "Is not this David the king of the land? Did they not sing to one another of him in dances,

'Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands?'"

¹² And David took these words to heart and was much afraid of Achish the king of Gath. ¹³ So he changed his behavior before them and pretended to be insane in their hands and made marks on the doors of the gate and let his spittle run down his beard. ¹⁴ Then Achish said to his servants, "Behold, you see the man is mad. Why then have you brought him to me? ¹⁵ Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to behave as a madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?" (ESV)

The next psalm we'll study, Psalm 34, also comes from this same incident.

Imagine David running to Gath with Goliath's sword! Now, Goliath was from Gath. He had been their champion. Now the man who had killed their champion comes to their king, likely seeking refuge from Saul's men. This was a foolish decision by David, one borne out of desperation. If David could not even find sanctuary in the tabernacle of God, where could he safely hide?

The people of Gath seized David. Now, according to Psalm 56, as David has descended from being slandered to being surrounded to being seized, David is afraid for the first time. He has been desperate, angry, pleading to God. But now he explicitly expresses that he is afraid.

And yet David resolves that when he is afraid, he will trust in God.

When it comes to fear, some people never want to admit that they're afraid. The fear of man in our cultural context can be subtle and we can easily deny that it has gripped our hearts. After all, we may be slandered, but we are not surrounded and we have not been violently seized. In a sense, it's easier to admit to the obvious fear. We all lock our doors and glance nervously around us when we're passing through certain neighborhoods in the city.

But the fear that causes us to be hypocritical or to avoid confrontation at all costs, the fear of rejection or shame, can be just as paralyzing and real, and yet we can call it other names – being

considerate, not wanting to make a fuss, being shy, not liking confrontation. But in the end, the fear of man is the fear of man, and it's far better if we confess it and own it.

Everyone has fears, so we would be foolish to deny them. David openly acknowledges the source of his fears in verses 1-2 –

*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.*

He repeats the source of his fear in verses 5-6 -

*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.*

Yet acknowledging our fears, even the ones that are rational, is just the first step. David acknowledges his fears and yet he resolves to trust in the Lord, in verse 3 –

*When I am afraid,
I put my trust in you.*

B. What Made Christ Anxious

not the fear of man but the fear of the Lord

Was Jesus ever afraid? Well, the Gospels never explicitly tell us that Jesus was afraid, but we do see Him in deep distress in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night He was betrayed. Jesus prayed three times, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not me will but yours, be done.” Clearly, Jesus did not want to endure the suffering of the cup that was appointed for Him.

Yet what was this cup that Jesus was reluctant to drink? It was not the betrayal by Jesus. Jesus Himself had calmly told Judas, “What you must do, do quickly.” It was not abandonment by His disciples, for He had calmly told them that they would all flee, just as it had been written, “I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter.” It was not even Peter’s denials, which Jesus calmly told Peter would happen three times before the rooster crowed. The cup Jesus asked His Father to remove from Him, if possible, was the cup of God’s wrath.

Jesus did not fear man, but He did fear the wrath of His Father, which would be poured out on Him in our place. He asked His Father three times if it would be possible for this cup to be removed, and He was in such deep agony over this cup that “His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”

We talk glibly sometimes about the fear of the Lord, but Jesus knew the fear of the Lord with the severest intensity. Yet in love for you and me and in His unwavering commitment to do His Father’s will, He prayed three times, “*Not my will, but yours, be done.*”

C. Our Only Hope in the Face of Fear

Whose word do we prize and praise?

We are not Jesus. He never feared man, but we often do. Lesser fears grip our hearts and minds with regularity, so what do we do? First, we need to be honest with the Lord about our fears. David is clearly exasperated by the relentlessness of the pressure he's feeling. We can see this in the fact that he repeats the phrase "all day long" three times in verses 1-2 & 5:

All day long an attacker oppresses me

My enemies trample on me all day long

All day long they injure my cause

And yet, just as David expresses his fears and concerns very clearly, even repeating "all day long" three times, so he states his confidence in God, specifically stating three times that He praises God's word:

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

As often as fear rears its ugly head, we must just as often return to our confidence in God's word. David repeats these lines in his prayer, which is a song of praise, because he needs to hear the truth repeatedly. It is God's word that David praises three times because he needs to hear the truth of God's goodness and promises to battle the lies that fear speaks to his mind. What word does David have in mind, particularly? It could be the word God spoke over him through the prophet Samuel, that David will be king of Israel. Neither Saul nor the Philistines will be able to kill him if God has ordained that he will sit on the throne over God's people.

We need God's word when we're faced with fear, too. We need to praise, to pray, to recite, to sing and to believe His word, His very great and precious promises. The apostle Paul had clearly taken some of these words from Psalm 56 to heart when he wrote Romans 8:31-39, a great passage for us to remember in times of fear:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

*"For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."*

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Sometimes we need a longer passage like that to read, pray and contemplate in our fear, but at other times a shorter promise of God is better. A great reason to memorize Scripture is because we can't always get our hands on a Bible when we're afraid. Here are some great quick promises to recite:

Just a few verses earlier in Romans 8, verse 28 says, "And we know that God works all things together for good for those who love Him and who are called according to His good purpose."

Philippians 1:6 says, "He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus."

And of course, Psalm 56:3-4 is great, too: "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. I God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

David's goal is remembering and praising God's word is not just to have courage and escape fear. No, ultimately, he is looking to thank the Lord for His deliverance and to walk before God. This is how he ends the psalm:

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.

But notice also that David was not content just to get comfort and hope for himself by reminding himself of God's word. He's also not just concerned that he give thanks to God and walk before Him. While this is a deeply personal psalm, arising from a time of great fear in David's life, he did not write it just for himself. He wrote it "To the Choirmaster" and he set it to a familiar tune, "According to the Dove on Far-Off Terebinth." We saw this last week, too, with Psalm 59, which was also deeply personal and which was also written for the choirmaster. Psalm 59 is set to an even more popular tune, "Do Not Destroy," a tune used for three other psalms, Psalms 57 & 58 (both also written by David) and Psalm 75 (written by Asaph).

In our fear, we need to remember God's goodness and His word, but we also need to remember His people. Acting faithlessly out of our fear, forgetting God's word, is not only foolish and self-destructive, but it's also harmful to God's people. Thus, remembering God's word and His people helps set our focus back where it belongs, as we trust in God and praise His word and also think about how to bless and serve His people.

Conclusion: Fear overcomes fear.

In 1952, J.B. Phillips wrote a great little book entitled, *Your God is Too Small*. Then, in 1997, Ed Welch wrote a book entitled, *When People Are Big and God is Small*. The point of both of these books is simple and profound: Our theology and our lives get out of line when our God is too small and when people

become more important than God. One way we can know this is happening is when people are scarier than God.

David needed to remind himself of the greatness of God and His word. David needed to trust God. A God great enough to be trusted is also a God great enough to be feared. He is the God tender enough to keep our tears in His bottle but great enough to deliver us from the hands of our most relentless enemies.

Ultimately, the only thing that can overcome our fear of man is the fear of the Lord. Jesus never feared men, but He did fear His Father. One who rightly fears the Lord will never need to fear anything less. Only by spending time in God's word, getting a bigger vision of Him and learning to worship Him with reverence and awe, will free us from our fears.

The author of Hebrews was writing to a church of people who were afraid. They were being tempted to deny Christ and return to Judaism to escape persecution. Hebrews was written to remind them of the superiority of Christ and to call them to stronger faith in Him. In one stirring section near the end of the letter, the author reminds these Hebrew Christians of the greatness of Christ and His kingdom, calling them to reverent worship. He does so by comparing the terrifying glory of Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Law, to Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem:

¹⁸ For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire. (Heb. 12:18-29, ESV)