



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1314

Psalm 27

Mark Mitchell

June 24, 2007

Dealing with Fear in the Presence of God

We live in a terrifying world. Every day we're reminded of this fact. We hear of natural disasters like floods, droughts, hurricanes, and of course, earthquakes. Thousands of lives are taken each year by these things in such a random and merciless fashion that we can't help but wonder if one day we'll be in the wrong place at the wrong time. We also hear of violent acts like burglary, rape, kidnapping and murder. Some of us know people who've been the victims of ruthless men and we wonder when it will be our turn. If that weren't enough, we hear of our best friends being afflicted with some dreaded disease such as cancer, AIDS, heart disease, MS, or diabetes.

All of these things remind us that the world is full of real danger. A certain amount of fear is a real part of our existence. But, our fears aren't always so easy to explain. For many of us, our fears are far more inner and psychological in nature. We fear failure or commitment. We fear intimacy or rejection. We fear crowds or being alone. We fear heights or the dark or closed in spaces. For many of us, our fears of both real and imagined danger are felt in something we call anxiety or worry. One psychologist has called anxiety the "official emotion of our age." It's been defined as "a small trickle of fear that meanders through the mind until it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained."

In some way, all of us have met up with this beast called fear. It's threatened both our inner peace and our outward poise. It's turned our spiritual muscles into mush. The question is, how do we deal with fear? How does a relationship with Christ impact the way we handle terrifying situations? Are believers any different than others in this regard? How do we get to that point where our fears don't control us?

Psalm 27 provides an answer to that question. It was written by one who was well acquainted with danger and fear—King David of Israel. As a young shepherd boy he faced wild beasts seeking to devour his flock. He faced the giant Goliath. Later, he was chased around the countryside by an enraged king named Saul. When David later became king, he faced threats from both within and without. Even his own son overtook his throne and ran him out of Jerusalem. Psalm 27 was written in response

to one of those fearful situations. Let's turn there and read it.

"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the defense of my life; whom shall I dread? When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh, my adversaries and my enemies, they stumbled and fell. Though a host encamp against me, my heart will not fear; though war arise against me, in spite of this I shall be confident. One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in His temple. For in the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tabernacle; in the secret place of His tent He will hide me; He will lift me up on a rock. And now my head will be lifted up above my enemies around me, and I will offer in His tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the LORD. Hear, O LORD, when I cry with my voice, and be gracious to me and answer me. When You said, 'Seek My face,' my heart said to You, 'Your face, O LORD, I shall seek.' Do not hide Your face from me, do not turn Your servant away in anger; You have been my help; do not abandon me nor forsake me, O God of my salvation! For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me up. Teach me Your way, O LORD, and lead me in a level path because of my foes. Do not deliver me over to the desire of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and such as breathe out violence. I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the godness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the LORD."

DEALING WITH FEAR IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

1. Express your feelings: As I read this Psalm I notice there seem to be two notes that are struck that are somewhat dissonant. There is a high note and there is a

low note. Verses 1-6 are marked by confidence in God while vv.7-12 are marked by crying out to God. In vv.1-6 David's confidence is expressed as he makes a number of strong affirmations. He comes to God and boldly says, "**I will not fear!**" But then in vv.7-12 he cries out to God like a threatened child: "**Hear O, Lord! Deliver me! Don't abandon me!**" This is a bit confusing because normally in his psalms David will start with crying out to God in need and then as he begins to gain perspective he offers confident praises.

So why does this Psalm move from a high note to a low note? I would say it's because that's exactly what David felt. We're emotional people and our emotions don't always fit a neat outline. One minute we're praising God, confident in his care and protection and the next minute we're crying out to him, feeling overwhelmed by our circumstances. And like David we need to learn to relate both of these emotions to God without fear of being rejected. To bring either of these emotions to God is in itself a valid expression of faith. So often we think maturity in the Christian life is measured by our ability to be unaffected by our circumstances, to sort of rise above all that's happening around us and maintain our complete composure. And because we think that way we don't express what we really feel to God. But David presents a different model of maturity. He shows us that a person of faith may at times feel overwhelmed with fear, but he's learned to express that and deal with that in the presence of God. General George Patton once said that "Courage is fear that has said its prayers." This Psalm affirms that. It tells us that the ultimate answer to fear is the presence of God.

As a parent, I'm delighted when my children come to me with their fears. That's what I want them to do. It's a joy to wrap my arms around them and watch them gain a sense of confidence in my presence. Isn't that how God feels with us?

2. Affirm God's faithfulness: When we come into the presence of God, one of the things that will help us is to remember and to boldly affirm that God is greater than that which we fear; to stand in his presence and get a hold of ourselves and say, "**If I have YOU, Lord, what do I have to be afraid of?**" In v.1 David calls the Lord his "light," his "salvation," his "defense," and his "refuge." And then he asks, "**Whom shall I fear? Whom shall I dread?**" He's asking the same thing Paul did in Romans 8: "**If God is for us, who can be against us?**" When we affirm the greatness of God's power and the greatness of his

love then that which we fear is shrunk down to its proper size.

Most often our fears are a result of a deficiency in our view of God. We either doubt his power or his love; his ability or his willingness to help. I usually don't have any problem believing in his power but I do sometimes doubt his love and his willingness. I'm like the leper who said to Jesus, "Lord, if you're willing, you can make me clean." He was saying, "Lord, I don't doubt your ability to heal, but I wonder about your willingness." But we can affirm God is both able and willing to deliver.

Sometimes I'm afraid that we emphasize the sovereignty of God and the need to submit to whatever the circumstances he places us in so much that we never trust him to do anything. But there are times that God's will is to deliver us and there are times that he wants us to trust him in faith and prayer to do just that. The Apostle Paul testified to God's deliverance of him in many instances. In 2 Tim.4:17 he says, "**I was delivered out of the lion's mouth.**" This didn't mean that he didn't suffer hardship and eventually we know that he died at the hands of a pagan emperor, but he still testified to God's deliverance.

David did as well. Part of his confidence stems from the fact that he has already seen how God has delivered him over and over again. He says, "**When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh, they stumbled and fell.**" He trusted God to act in the same way in the future. Think of your own life. Think of the many ways God has already delivered you. Let his past faithfulness fuel your faith in future protection. Come into his presence and say, "Because of who you have proven to be in my life time and time again, I will not fear!"

3. Seek God's presence: But when fear and anxiety nibble away at our confidence, what do we do? David kept seeking God's presence. It was something he had to keep on doing. "**One thing that I have asked from the Lord that I shall seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life...**" To be in God's presence was David's singular passion. "One thing" he says, "nothing else really matters." The experience of danger and fear force us to recognize what's really important. It crystalizes our focus. David viewed God's presence as a place of protection from his enemies: "**...he will conceal me... he will hide me... he will lift me up on a rock.**" You see, in God's presence we're safe. And dwelling in God's presence in the midst of danger is something we have to diligently and persistently seek. "**When you said, 'Seek my face,' my heart said to you, 'Your face, O Lord, I shall seek.'**" It won't happen automatically. It's something we have to make a continual choice about. It's a process. In the midst of fear my attention is constantly being diverted from the Lord. And to

keep from being paralyzed by it I must constantly refocus, each step of the way.

A young bride to be was very nervous on the day before her wedding, so she went to talk with her minister. "I'm afraid I might not make it through the ceremony properly," she confessed. The pastor assured her that everything would be fine: He coached her: "When you enter the church tomorrow and the processional begins, you will be walking down the same aisle you've walked many times before. Concentrate on that aisle. When you get halfway down the aisle, you'll see the altar, where you and your family have worshiped for many years. Concentrate on that altar. Then, when you're almost to the altar, you'll see your groom, the one you love. Concentrate on him." The bride was relieved, and left to prepare for her big moment. The next day, she walked down the aisle with her chin up and eyes bright—a beautiful, confident bride. But those along the center were a bit surprised to hear her muttering over and over: "Aisle, altar, him. Aisle, altar, him."

In a sense, that's what we do in the midst of our fears. Every step we take, we concentrate on him. We keep seeking his presence.

4. Confess your sin: But as we seek his face we sometimes come face to face with a different kind of enemy. We come face to face with our own sin. And with that knowledge of sin we tremble. Will he reject us? This reflects David's mood in the second half of the Psalm: **"...do not hide your face from me...do not turn your servant away in anger... do not abandon me nor forsake me..."** We know we're unworthy of God. We know how crooked our hearts are. As we seek the Lord's presence our greatest fear becomes that our sin might disqualify us from God's presence. You might say that our greatest fear isn't that our enemies will destroy us, but rather that God might reject us. Anyone who has sincerely sought the face of God knows what it means to fear God's rejection. David felt that. But, there are a couple of things that he shows us we can fall back on for comfort.

First, we can fall back on the fact that God is the one who made the first move towards us. David recalls that his desire to dwell in God's presence originated with God. God made the first move. God is the one who says to us, "Seek my face!" He pursues us. Some of you fear that because of sin in your life God has rejected you or left you. You long for his presence, but you don't feel it so you conclude that he's gone. But if God had left you, you wouldn't have the desire for him in the first place. That desire comes from the Spirit of God. It's his loving invitation to seek his face. Paul says in Romans 8:15, **"You have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we**

cry out, 'Abba, Father!'"

The other thing that we can fall back on is that God's love is of a different sort than human love. He says, **"For my father and mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me up."** We don't know how his father and mother had forsaken him. But, the point is that God's love and care extend even beyond that of mother and father. Even their love is somewhat conditional or limited, but God's love endures. As he puts it, "the Lord will take me up." The image is of a father lifting up his crying child to provide for its needs. When we come to God in need of help he won't say, "Well, you've been bad today. No help for you."

While it's necessary that we confess our own unworthiness to God, it's even more necessary that we trust in his grace. Though we feel unworthy, God won't abandon us. How much more do we know that than David did because of the cross where our sin was judged once and for all. In the midst of fear when we cry out to him in need he doesn't see us as rebellious sinners but as much loved, needy children who have been purchased by the blood of his own dear Son.

5. Ask God for wisdom: There are also times when in the midst of our fear we need to ask God for wisdom. Look at vv. 11-12: **"Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me in a level path..."** David was a brilliant man. But he was aware of his inadequacy to handle life, so he turns to God for wisdom. He says **"lead me in a level path because of my foes...for false witnesses have risen against me..."** David knew that his enemies were watching his every step to find something they could catch him in. And if they couldn't find something they might just make something up. Because of that David keenly felt the need for God to give him wisdom so he could walk with integrity.

Whenever our fears revolve around people, people that don't like us very much, this prayer is especially appropriate. Part of the problem is that these people tend to provoke us to anger and we're often tempted to do something stupid in retaliation. Fear can cause us to do stupid things. My own tendency is to go into a "control mode" when fear and especially anxiety get the best of me. I begin to see the people around me as pawns on a chessboard that I need to protect by placing them where I think they need to go. It never works. Instead I need to learn to say with David, "Teach me your way, O Lord. Lead me in a level path."

David has moved from confident affirmation of God's presence and deliverance to humble, needy and even desperate crying out to God for his presence. He knows he's a sinner in need of grace. He knows his fear

could drive him to do something stupid so he needs wisdom. If the Psalm ended in v.12 we would wonder if David ever pulled out of his fear. How does he pull himself out of this abyss?

6. Wait for the Lord: The answer comes alas in vv.13-14. **“I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the LORD.”** Here we move back into confident affirmation; confident enough to even tell others what to do. It's not the affirmation of God's past or present deliverance, but rather of his future presence. It's an affirmation of hope—that whatever happens, he WILL see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. For David, being in the land of the living probably meant staying alive. Of course, we know that we will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living even beyond the grave. We know that in his death and resurrection Jesus conquered the sting and finality of death so that we don't even have to fear that.

In the meantime, we wait. And that's where David ends this journey out of fear. **“Wait for the Lord. Be strong and let your heart take courage. Yes, wait for the Lord.”** Like David, we're still waiting for God's deliverance. We're holding on in faith to God's promise to deliver us.

Not long before his death, Henri Nouwen wrote about some friends of his who were trapeze artists, called the Flying Roudellas. They told Nouwen there's a special relationship between flyer and catcher on the trapeze. The flyer is the one that lets go, and the catcher is the one that catches. As the flyer swings high above the crowd on the trapeze, the moment comes when he must let go. He arcs out into the air. His job is to remain as still as possible and wait for the strong hands of the catcher to pluck him from the air. One of the Flying Roudellas told Nouwen, "The flyer must never try to catch the catcher." The flyer must wait in absolute trust. The catcher will catch him, but he must wait.

In many ways, we live now in that in-between time when we have let go but are still waiting to be caught. Waiting in the presence of God is a disciplined refusal to act before God acts. It's hard to wait when we're afraid, but waiting in hope of the One who promises to catch us makes it easier.

CONCLUSION

We live in a terrifying world. We're confronted with both real and imagined danger. But the answer to fear is the presence of God. In his presence, we can express our feelings of fear to him without the additional fear of rejection. In his presence, we gain strength as we affirm both his power and his love. In his presence we hear his invitation to seek his face and the reality of that face becomes more real to us than our fear. In his presence we confess our sin and learn that even in our sin he will not forsake us. In his presence, he gives wisdom to live with integrity amidst people that would love for us to fail.

In his book on prayer, E.M. Bounds tells a story about what happened to a friend of his on an early morning hunt: “I heard the barking of a number of dogs chasing a deer. Looking at a large open field in front of me, I saw a young fawn making its way across the field and giving signs that its race was almost run. It leaped over the rails of the enclosed place and crouched within ten feet of where I stood. A moment later two of the hounds came over, and the fawn ran in my direction and pushed its head between my legs. I lifted the little thing to my breast, and, swinging round and round, fought off the dogs. Just then I felt that all the dogs in the West could not and would not capture that fawn after its weakness had appealed to my strength.”

So it is when we in our weakness and fear come into the presence of Almighty God and appeal to his strength. Will you purpose to do that? Will you make running or stumbling into his presence the FIRST thing, not the the LAST thing you do when you're afraid? Will you see the other places you are tempted to run as counterfeit gods which really can't deliver you? Will you affirm, “One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life...”?

© 2007 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA