

Main Idea: In Psalm 56 we learn from David what to say to God when we are under attack and afraid. There are five movements in this prayer for help.

Think about it: What do we learn about music from the Psalms?

1. Our songs should be theological.
  2. Our songs should be singable.
  3. Our songs should be memorable.
- I. When you are afraid, tell God what you know (1-2).
    - A. You have a big problem.
    - B. You need His mercy.
  - II. When you are afraid, tell God what you feel (3-4).
    - A. You are afraid.
    - B. You are choosing to trust in God.
      1. His Word gives you confidence.
      2. His presence gives you courage.
  - III. When you are afraid, tell God what you want (5-8).
    - A. Ask God to deal with your enemies (5-7).
    - B. Ask God to record your tears (8).
  - IV. When you are afraid, tell God what you believe (9-11).
    - A. You affirm that your enemies will fail in the end.
    - B. You affirm that God is for you.
      1. His Word gives you confidence.
      2. His presence gives you courage.
  - V. When you are afraid, tell God what you expect (12-13).
    - A. You expect God to help you.
    - B. You expect to show God your appreciation.
      1. David’s circumstances have not yet changed.
      2. David’s perspective has changed.
- A Closing Question: Is God the gravitational center of my life?

Consider three scenarios and think of what emotion they have in common.

One, you’re listening to the news on the radio, and they’re talking about the government shutdown. Pretty normal conversation these days. The commentator’s voice gets louder and louder as he describes the rising tension between the two camps, and he concludes, “I don’t think the American people can take much more than this. Something bad is going to happen.”

Two, you hear a friend share the tragic news of how his adult child has walked away from Christ. After raising him in the church and introducing him to the One who alone can give life that’s abundant and eternal, he’s now heartbroken as he shares how the world, the flesh, and the devil have taken his son captive. And then you begin to think of your own children, and the choices facing them.

Three, your boss sees your Bible on your desk, and though you’ve never wasted company time reading it nor talking about it but to the contrary have sought to honor Christ by being a respectful, hard worker, says to you, “I need you to do something for me, off the record.” And he begins to describe a course of action that would violate your Christian integrity. “If you don’t do it,” he says, “let me just say, you’ll wish you had when it’s evaluation time, because there’s a line of people out there that would love to have your job.”

So what do those three scenarios have in common? They’re all situations that produce a very powerful emotional response. *Fear*.

Anybody struggling with fear these days? With what’s happening in the world around us, and to families, and in workplaces, many are. And that makes the following testimony quite staggering...

---

\*\* Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> For an earlier treatment of this psalm, see the Psalms of David series and the message preached 5/27/07.

*I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?*

Those words from the pen of David, quite frankly, amaze me. How would you answer that question, “What can man do to me?” I can think of a lot of things man could do to me, indeed, a lot of potential reasons for fear.

Terrorists kill soldiers and civilians alike on a daily basis. Unpredictable nations like Iran and North Korea continue to threaten the world with the development of nuclear weapons. Companies get rid of 25-year-employees and replace them with cheaper overseas labor. Inner city violence isn’t just in the inner cities any more. Children are devastated by parents who break their marriage vows to each other. The elderly are abandoned in care facilities. Schools now have to have gun policies. Travelers take off their shoes and wait in long lines at airport security checks.

*I won’t be afraid?* Is that what David said? And...*what can man do to me?* Is he serious? Absolutely. And it’s not because he was living in a protected palace at the time. Actually, he himself was in custody facing death charges, with two nations intent on killing him.

So is it really possible to overcome your fears in a fearful world? Indeed it is and I want us to learn how this morning from David’s Psalm 56.

In the preface to the Psalms the *NIV Study Bible* makes this helpful observation, “At the core of the theology of the Psalter is the conviction that the gravitational center of life ...is God.”<sup>2</sup> That’s what God desires and deserves from us, to be *the gravitational center of our lives*. And that’s what the Psalms help us do, put God right at the center of our every experience, including fearful ones as in Psalm 56.

*Background to Psalm 56: Notice the heading...*

**For the director of music.** – Even though 2 Samuel 23:1 calls David “Israel’s singer of songs,” here we learn that David also taught Israel to sing. In fact, he recruited others to help him. In this case, he gave his song to Israel’s music director [KJV ‘chief musician’] apparently so he could incorporate it into Israel’s public worship.

Who was this music director? We’re not told. Nehemiah 12:46 indicates there were several music directors under David’s leadership: “For long ago, in the days of David and *Asaph*, there had been directors for the singers and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.”

1 Chronicles 15:27 mentions another of David’s worship leaders, the one who led the music when David moved the ark up to Jerusalem: “Now David was clothed in a robe of fine linen, as were all the Levites who were carrying the ark, and as were the singers, and *Kenaniah*, who was in charge of the singing of the choirs.”<sup>3</sup>

The fact that David mentions a *director* of music implies that there were others who would follow his lead in singing. Not everybody can direct, but everybody can sing. And David wanted Israel to sing!

By the way, I need to point out that *Kenaniah* wasn’t just musically gifted. 1 Chronicles 15:22 states, “*Kenaniah* the head Levite was in charge of the singing; that was his responsibility because he was skillful at it.”

Don’t miss the words *head Levite* and *skillful*. To lead God’s people in worship, both qualifications are vital: spiritual and musical. If a person isn’t spiritually qualified he must not lead God’s people in worship no matter how gifted he may be musically. Likewise, in order to lead God’s people in song the spiritual individual must possess sufficient musical skill to enable God’s people to worship their excellent God in an excellent way.

---

<sup>2</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, p. 776.

<sup>3</sup> KJV. ‘company of them that gave thanks’; lit. a “thanksgiving company”—a great perspective for a choir!

**To the tune of “A Dove on Distant Oaks.”** – We don’t know what the tune sounded like but its title was fitting, an innocent lovely bird forced to perch far from his home. That was the psalmist’s predicament, as we’ll soon see.

**Of David.** – Of the 150 psalms David’s name is attached to 73 of them. Six of them were categorized as this one...

**A *miktam*.** – This was some sort of literary or musical term.<sup>4</sup>

*Think about it: What do we learn about music from the Psalms?*

We learn that God wants His people *to sing*, to sing *together*, to sing *about Him* and to sing *for Him*, and then *to live* what they sing.

I would suggest we find here three good guidelines for church music today. Our songs should be *theological*, *singable*, and *memorable*.

First, we need songs that are rich in theology. David doesn’t waste words; each one expresses truth, sometimes *about* God and at other times *to* God, but always theologically precise. As far as song lyrics go, simply put, if you wouldn’t say it in a sermon, or in a Sunday School lesson, you shouldn’t say it in a song.

We also need songs that are *singable*. The Jews didn’t go to the house of God to be entertained (there weren’t even seats in the tabernacle or temple), but to give God something (an offering, a prayer, a song, attention to His Word, and so on). They were participants, not spectators. That’s why we need songs that are singable. The purpose of church music isn’t to entertain us but are to enable us to express ourselves rightly to God.

And they should be *memorable*. David’s uses powerful poetic devices in his psalms, in part, to help his people remember the words. The songs Israel sang served as “take home theology” for the people of God, and it’s no different for us today.

Thirteen, maybe fourteen of David’s psalms give a historical setting in the heading. Psalm 56 is one of them...

**When the Philistines had seized him in Gath.** – When did that occur? It happened before David became king. The Lord told him he was to be Israel’s next king, but King Saul doesn’t like the idea. In fact, King Saul had ordered his troops to surround David’s house and kill him, but David escaped. After making a quick stop at Nob where the high priest Ahimelech gave him some food and a sword (Goliath’s), David fled the country and went to Gath.

You know things are bad if David is willing to leave Israel and go to Gath, of all places, for safe haven. Gath was the hometown of Goliath, the giant David killed just a few years earlier! Why in the world would David run to the hometown of the hero he had killed?

It shows how desperate he was. Saul’s soldiers have orders to kill him, but they would never expect him to go to Gath. That’s like a rabbit running from a hunter into a fox’s den.

Whatever David’s reason for going to Gath, his plan failed, as 1 Samuel 21:10-12 explains: “That day David fled from Saul and went to Achish king of Gath. But the servants of Achish said to him, ‘Isn’t this David, the king of the land? Isn’t he the one they sing about in their dances: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands’?” David took these words to heart and was *very much afraid* of Achish king of Gath.”

Don’t underestimate those three words, *very much afraid*. David was scared out of his mind. He pretended insanity by scratching the doors and drooling down his beard until the king of Gath said, “Look at the man! He is insane! Why bring him to me (1 Sam. 21:14)?” And so David fled Gath, now a fugitive hated in two countries.

---

<sup>4</sup> Other psalms called “a miktam”: Psalm 16, 57, 58, 59, & 60.

1 Samuel 21 tells us what David *did* in Gath. Two psalms tell us what David *prayed* in Gath, Psalm 34 and Psalm 56. In Psalm 56 we learn from David what to say to God when we are under attack and afraid. There are five movements in this prayer for help, and they show us five things we ought to say to God when we're afraid.

### I. When you are afraid, tell God what you know (1-2).

Verses 1-2 “Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me; all day long they press their attack. My slanderers pursue me all day long; many are attacking me in their pride.”

What do you know if you're facing treason charges in your home country and are in custody in another country for killing their hero? Here's what you know, and it's also what you want God to know that you know! You tell the Lord two things...

**A. You have a big problem.** And I mean *big*. Notice the intense language David uses to describe the actions of his enemy against him: in verse 1, *hotly pursue* [lit. ‘pant,’ it’s what an animal does as it’s chasing hard after what it hopes will be it’s lunch; it’s as if David can feel the enemy’s breath on his back<sup>5</sup>]... *press their attack* [a military term, ‘to launch an aggressive offensive’]; in verse 2 he repeats the same verbs but adds modifiers to them, *pursue me all day long... attacking me in their pride*.

What should you do if you're facing that kind of human opposition? Tell God what you know, that you have a big problem! And then this...

**B. You need His mercy.** “Be merciful to me, O God,” says David. He doesn’t ask God for what he deserves, but for *mercy*.

The Hebrew title by which David addresses ‘God’ is *Elohim*.<sup>6</sup> It’s the same title Moses used in recording the first verse of the Bible. “In the beginning *Elohim* created the heavens and the earth.” *Elohim* is the one without beginning and ending, the one who by merely speaking a word created the sun, moon, and stars, and with another word brought the earth into existence, and by speaking still other words populated the earth with plants, birds, and animals, and finally by scooping up some dirt fashioned a man and breathed life into that man, declaring him to be His image-bearer.

You don’t make demands of One so great, especially since we entered this world as His rebels, a condition we inherited from the first rebel, Adam, and willingly expressed ourselves. No, you ask for mercy.

When you’re in fearful circumstances, first tell God what you know. Then...

### II. When you are afraid, tell God what you feel (3-4).

Listen to David in verse 3, “When I am afraid, I will trust in you.” What do you feel when godless men are intent on killing you? Here’s what you feel...

**A. You are afraid.** Do godly people feel fear? David did! David, the man who killed a lion and bear with his hands, Goliath with a slingshot, and countless Philistines in battle, all prior to this moment, now says, “When I am afraid.” Not *if* but *when*.

Fear is a natural initial response to danger. Sure David felt fear. But he didn’t *live by* his fear. He didn’t give in to his fear. Nor will we if, like David, we respond in a God-pleasing way to the fear we feel.

You say, “What’s the God-honoring response?” It’s this. After telling God you are afraid, then affirm that...

**B. You are choosing to trust in God.** “When I am afraid *I will trust in you.*”

---

<sup>5</sup> Eric Lane, p. 254.

<sup>6</sup> It’s worth noting that in contrast to Psalm 59 where David uses *many* titles for God, in Psalm 56 he uses only two: *Elohim* (verses 1, 4, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13) and *Yahweh* (verse 10).

I can read your mind at this point. “Wait a minute. How can I trust God when I’m scared speechless?” I can read your mind because that’s my first thought, too. Thankfully, in the very next verse David shows us two powerful energizers that turn us from fear to trust.

Verse 4—“In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?” Notice two energizers...

1. *His Word gives you confidence.* “In God, whose word I praise.” Note that David’s reason for trusting is not the shifting sand of some mystical feeling, but the solid ground of God’s Word.

What did God’s “word” mean to David? Remember, it’s 1000 B.C. The Scriptures that God had given the world by David’s day would have included only the Pentateuch, maybe Joshua and Judges, perhaps Job. “That is only a portion of our Bible, but it was enough to make God’s character and desires for his people known.”<sup>7</sup>

David probably has something else in mind, too. God had made a promise to David back in 1 Samuel 16: “You will be Israel’s next king.” That promise, that *word* from God, sustained David during many discouraging days, like this one in Philistine captivity. “I don’t know how I’m going to survive Saul’s attacks and escape from these guards in Gath, but I know I can’t serve as king if I’m dead or in a prison cell in Gath and You said I would be Israel’s next king. So I choose to believe You, God. I trust that You will do what You said.”

But that’s not all. David mentions a second energizer. His Word gives you confidence. And...

2. *His presence gives you courage.* “In God,” David begins verse 4 and then repeats himself, “In God I trust.” The reality of Elohim’s presence filled David with courage.

Do you trust God? If you are Christian, you trusted Him for salvation by taking Him at His Word. “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved,” His Word declares (Acts 16:31). If you have been saved it’s because you trusted in the Lord and in His Word.

If you trusted Him for the salvation of your soul, can you not trust Him with lesser concerns, like material needs (food and housing), or personal needs (like overcoming loneliness or insecurity), or even “those sometimes dangerous circumstances that cause fear and desperation?”<sup>8</sup> Sure, man can hurt God’s servant, but he can’t defeat him.<sup>9</sup>

If you want to move from fear to faith, then do what David did. Meditate upon God’s Word and remind yourself of God’s presence. When your mind is filled with God’s Word and fixed upon the reality of His presence you will begin to trust Him. And as Charles Spurgeon wisely observed, “He who can trust will soon sing.”<sup>10</sup>

Remember, this is a *song*, a song for the fearful. And in this song we learn, first, to tell God what you *know*, and then tell Him what you *feel*. Thirdly...

### III. When you are afraid, tell God what you want (5-8).

If your mind is saturated with His Word and your gaze fixed on His presence, then *what you want* will be His honor in your current circumstances. So tell Him what you want, as David did in verses 5-8:

“All day long they twist my words; they are always plotting to harm me. They conspire, they lurk, they watch my steps, eager to take my life. On no account let them

---

<sup>7</sup> James Boice, p. 471.

<sup>8</sup> James Boice, *Psalms, Vol. 2*, p. 471.

<sup>9</sup> Observation by Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 203.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, Vol. 1, p. 465.

escape; in your anger, O God, bring down the nations. Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll— are they not in your record?”

I get the sense that the *slander* seemed to bother David more than the *danger* did. Sure his enemy wants to kill him, but to justify it they keep attacking David’s character, misrepresenting David’s intent, and twisting David’s words.

So David told God exactly what he wanted. And like David, if we’re being attacked we can bring two requests to God.

**A. Ask God to deal with your enemies (5-7).** “On no account let them escape,” David says. This is no small predicament for David. It’s not just a few out of sorts individuals who are after him, but the *nation* of Philistia.

Do you hear the irony in that request? David has been captured by the Philistines but he says to God, “Don’t let *them* escape.” Or to paraphrase, “God, I’ve got my enemies right where I want them, they’re all together in one place, right around me and out in the open. You can’t miss them. Now don’t let them get away!” Now that’s confidence in God!

Do you have any enemies? Any people who are making life hard for you? Know this. You have the privilege to tell God about it. And not just tell, but ask Him to deal with those who are attacking you. Also...

**B. Ask God to record your tears (8).** David was no stoic when it came to pain. His enemy’s hating and hunting resulted in great discouragement at times, even tears. “Record my lament,” he says to God. “List my tears on your scroll.” He sees his tears as evidence before God’s court, evidence that God must surely see and take into account.

This is so practical. What do you do with your enemies and your tears? David is teaching us to present them to the Lord and ask Him to deal with them.

Now the fourth movement. After telling God what you know, feel, and want, then...

#### IV. When you are afraid, tell God what you believe (9-11).

At this point in the psalm David makes two affirmations. Once again, let’s personalize his example. I urge you to do what David did. First...

**A. You affirm that your enemies will fail in the end.** Verses 9 begins, “Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help.” How did David know his enemies would turn back? Because he asked God to turn them back, and he asked God to turn them back because he knew it was God’s plan for him to be king some day. He’s asking for God’s will to be done and he can therefore affirm that it *will* be done. His enemies will fail.

So will yours, child of God. True, your enemy the devil is a roaring lion. But his days are numbered. He will fail in the end. You have God’s Word on it. And on this...

**B. You affirm that God is for you.** David concludes verse 9 with these words, “By this I will know that God is for me.”<sup>11</sup> God is *for me*. That thought causes David to repeat what apparently is the refrain of the song introduced back in verse 4. He affirms again in verses 10-11, “In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise— in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” And so David wants us to know that...

1. *His Word gives you confidence.* And...

2. *His presence gives you courage.*

This cannot be overstated. The key to trusting God is to trust His Word. Eric Lane is right, “When his word is trusted he is trusted.”

Suppose you were having severe financial problems, in fact, you were about to lose your home. Quite understandably, you were feeling great anxiety and fear as the payment deadline approached. Now suppose that, on the day before being evicted from

---

<sup>11</sup> KJV and NKJV state, “This I know because God is for me.”

your house, you received a phone call from someone who said, “I’ve deposited \$100,000 in your checking account.” Would those words affect how you felt?

It depends, doesn’t it? If you didn’t know the person, you might consider his offer a cruel joke and merely add anger to your anxious and fearful heart.

What if you did know the person but your knowledge was limited only to one casual conversation you’d had with him when standing in the check out line at Wal Mart, at which time you learned his name and that he was retired and lived alone. In that case, his words might cause some initial excitement but feelings of doubt would likely kick in shortly after you hung up the phone.

Now suppose you did know the person on the telephone and knew him well. It was Mr. Jones, not only the wealthiest man in the county but also a dear friend of yours since childhood, a man that you have breakfast with on a weekly basis whose son is named after you. How would his words affect your anxiety and fear? They would chase them away, and quickly!

What made the difference? In order to trust someone’s word, you must know that person, and specifically that the person is *trustworthy*. The more fully you know that trustworthy person the more fully you will be able to trust his word. To borrow from Lane again, when *his word* is trusted *he* is trusted.

David trusted God’s Word because David knew God well. And David knew God well because David knew God’s Word well and therefore trusted God fully, no matter how desperate the situation.

Do you have a plan for the daily intake of God’s Word? Does that plan include praying over what you’ve read as well as memorizing God’s Word?

Now notice something else. David takes it a step further. He not only trusts God’s Word. He *praises* it. He extols it by calling attention to it, reflecting on it, singing it, and, as we’ll see momentarily, living as if it had already come true.

Are you struggling with negative feelings? Then do what David did. *Pray*. Psalm 56 is a prayer-song, and prayer is a God-ordained means of overcoming feelings of anxiety.<sup>12</sup>

That’s what Philippians 4:6-7 says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Which brings us to the end of the song. After telling God what know, feel, want, and believe...

#### V. When you are afraid, tell God what you expect (12-13).

Verses 12-13 “I am under vows to you, O God; I will present my thank offerings to you. For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.”

Did you notice how David is now talking about what *will happen* in the future? He’s looking beyond his captivity to the time when he will be delivered. In other words he’s stating his expectations. Because God is in control David expects two things to occur, and so should we, if we know Him.

**A. You expect God to help you.** “For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling.” David speaks of his prison experience in Gath in past tense language. His deliverance is as good as done.

---

<sup>12</sup> Lane, p. 256.

But God doesn't deliver us from trouble so we can live an easy, comfortable, self-absorbed life, but so we can do something. Do what? David says he's going to do two things, one in verse 12 and the other in verse 13...

Verse 12—*I will present my thank offerings*. That's the appropriate response when God does something in your life, to give God a thank offering. Don't just be a taker. Be a giver, and specifically, give God thank offerings. And then this...

Verse 13—*I will walk before God in the light of life*. God delivers us from problems so we can *walk before Him*. To walk before Him means to go where He wants us to go and to do what He wants us to do with our lives.

In other words, you expect God to help you, and consequently when He does...

**B. You expect to show God your appreciation.** By giving thanks and by living before God in the light of life.

Let me remind you that David is still in danger when he states these resolves. *This is what I am going to do*, he says, *once God intervenes*. To put it plainly...

1. *David's circumstances have not yet changed*. But something has changed and it's happened while David has been singing this psalm...

2. *David's perspective has changed*.

It's worth noting that Psalm 56 is quoted elsewhere in the Bible. We find verses 4 & 11 in Psalm 118:6 and in Hebrews 13:6. Paul refers to verse 9 in Romans 8:31. Jesus seems to have the last words of verse 13 in mind in John 8:12 when He says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

This is the ultimate fulfillment of Psalm 56, of course, as is the case with all of Scripture. It points to Jesus. As Alexander Maclaren says, "The really living are they who live in Jesus, and the real light of the living is the sunshine that streams on those who thus live, because they live in him."<sup>13</sup>

Yes, Psalm 56 points us to Jesus. So let's look at Jesus. See Him as His enemies are plotting to kill Him. He's not afraid. He knows that His enemy will not take His life for indeed, He actually plans to give it as a ransom payment for sinners like you and me. And He knows that the prison doors of His grave will not hold Him tight, for on the third day He will conquer death and leave His tomb alive! He knows that's His Father's plan and He knows that His Father's plan cannot fail. Nor did it fail!

Now let's go back to where we started. These are fearful times, and at times we struggle with fear. All of us. So what should we do? Sing a song, David's song. It goes like this...

When you're afraid, tell God what you know. When you're afraid, tell God what you feel. When you're afraid, tell God what you want. When you're afraid, tell God what you believe. When you're afraid, tell God what you expect.

The Lord loves that song. The Lord hears that song. The Lord blesses the singer of that song, by His grace and for His glory.

#### A Closing Question: Is God the gravitational center of my life?

He was in David's life. Is He in ours? Let's be honest. What needs to change so that God is indeed *central* to our being? Let the changes begin today *with a song*, David's song. Take heed to Psalm 56 and make God the *gravitational center of your life*.

---

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Maclaren, quoted by James Boice, *Psalms, Vol. 2*, p. 472.