

Above all else (Psalm 27)

Last week the psalmist [Psalm 49] reminded us: all humans must die, however for us, who truly believe in God as our Redeemer, we have confident hope of waking on resurrection morning in God's kingdom of light.

Today we will read and meditate on Psalm 27, penned by David, a man after God's heart.

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

2 When evildoers assail me
to eat up my flesh,
my adversaries and foes,
it is they who stumble and fall.

3 Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me,
yet I will be confident.

4 One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

5 For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will lift me high upon a rock.

6 And now my head shall be lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

7 Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me and answer me!

8 You have said, "Seek my face."
My heart says to you,

"Your face, LORD, do I seek."

9 Hide not your face from me.
Turn not your servant away in anger,
O you who have been my help.

Cast me not off; forsake me not,
O God of my salvation!

10 For my father and my mother have forsaken me,
but the LORD will take me in.

11 Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

12 Give me not up to the will of my adversaries;

for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they breathe out violence.

13 I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living!

14 Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

The psalmist begins on a confident note, declaring, “The Lord is my light and my salvation.” Convinced of this, David says he will not be shaken by fear although enemies rise against him. Even if an army attacks and besieges him, he is confident that he won't be overwhelmed. This is something all of us can say because we have a common enemy who wants to trip us up, mislead us and devour us.

Why is David so confident? Because he steadfastly sets his mind to seek one thing: to “dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.” This single minded vision is why God called David “a man after his heart.” Isn't the solution for all of us? – spending time every day adoring the Lord and talking with him.

David was convinced that when the day of trouble comes – and it does – the Lord would keep him safe. He will hide me and set me high upon a rock. There's no denying, all of us encounter hardships, trials and persecutions but will we trust God and take refuge in him?

The prophet Isaiah put it this way, “You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord is the Rock eternal.” (Isaiah 26:3-4)

We read in 2 Timothy 4 an inspiring testimony from the apostle Paul near the end of his life. Shortly after telling Timothy “the time for my departure is near” Paul encouraged Timothy by summarizing how the Lord had delivered him, and indeed, would continue rescuing him from various attacks even though Paul experienced a lot of hardships, “I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every attack, and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.” Although Paul expected his earthly life would end, he was unshakably confident that God would bring him safely home into his heavenly kingdom.

Let me share an example in more recent times of someone who was confident in the Lord in the face of many trials and much opposition. My grandparents, Charles and June Foster, went to the heart of Africa – what is today called Zambia – in 1917 to bring Africans the message of hope and salvation through Jesus Christ. They endured untold challenges and experienced personal anguish and suffering. For example, one baby died in infancy. Another was stricken with meningitis and severely handicapped until eventually he died as a young adult. Yet another son, Herbert, who was my father, grew up to be a dynamic leader pioneering a new mission work. He too died of cancer at the age of 34. I years 8 years old. He had just finished building a home for our family, 7 children and also laid the foundations of what eventually developed into a thriving church.

The Lord graciously gave my grandparents the joy of seeing one son become a missionary doctor who returned to Africa and served the very same community and tribe among which his parents had pioneered. Dr Bob Foster's ministry impacted many lives in addition to other tribes establishing a reputation as a doctor and preacher that has become legendary across that region of Africa.

Charles and June persevered through all these hardships in addition to much spiritual opposition, yet they did not lose hope. Like David, Isaiah and Paul, they waited patiently, trusting they would “see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” (Psalm 27:13-14)

My grandparents served the Lord in Zambia all their lives right into their 70's. Finally in their 80's they returned to live out their final days in Angola with their son, Dr Bob. There were times through their life when they experienced various trials failures and discouragements on top of suffering tragic losses in their family as mentioned earlier. They were not immune to struggling with doubts at critical moments, perhaps similar to John the Baptist who doubted at one point that Jesus was the Messiah. But somehow, through it all, Charles and June kept on looking to the Lord and clung to him.

Let us review for a moment how Psalm 27 begins. We saw how the psalmist was fearless and undaunted in the face of an advancing enemy army. One gets the image of David as a towering spiritual giant. However, we must bear in mind that even godly people like David have failings. He struggled with temptation, sin, discouragement and doubts as we do. We see a glimpse of these struggles in verse 7 where David cries out for help to the Lord. He struggled with uncertainties, even bordering on doubt. In fact, he almost seems unsure that God will hear his requests. Listen carefully as we look again at verses 7-9.

Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;
 be gracious to me and answer me!
8 You have said, "Seek my face."
My heart says to you,
 "Your face, LORD, do I seek."
9 Hide not your face from me.
Turn not your servant away in anger,
 O you who have been my help.
Cast me not off; forsake me not,
 O God of my salvation!

It is interesting to see in verses 8&9 how David's thoughts and musings unfold in a somewhat conversational manner, as though talking with God as a friend. He then pleads with God not to cast him away or unleash his just anger against him because he is conscious of his sin and understands that he doesn't deserve mercy from God. O Lord hear my pleas for mercy, "Enter not into judgment with your servant for no one living is righteous before you." Perhaps David was wrestling with a sense of unworthiness or guilt or shame. We can all relate to this can't we?

David's "conversation" with God, leads him to realize three things: First he **doesn't deserve mercy**, but deep in his heart he knows God is merciful and caring towards his children. Secondly, he reminds himself that God has been his **helper** in the past and will continue to help him. And thirdly, he trusts in God as his **Saviour**.

As a result of calling for help and talking with the Lord, David is once again, able to re-affirm what he declared so boldly at the beginning. "I am confident," he says, that "I will see God's goodness in the land of the living." However, this time he clarifies that even if God doesn't **immediately** answer our prayers, we must not stop trusting and waiting for the Lord. Like David we need to encourage ourselves to take heart and press on no matter what.

We have considered a number of admirable examples of people who persevered through hard times. But what about ordinary brothers and sisters who feel these cases are the exception, not the norm. What about "us" everyday Christians who aren't so noble or so strong? As you compare yourself to these great examples of bravery and perseverance, perhaps you don't feel inspired, you simply feel inadequate and discouraged. If this is how you feel, let me share an encouraging story I received from a dear friend in Durban who was forced to leave his war-torn country of Congo 16 yrs ago. I wish I could tell you some of the awful hardships he's endured with his 6 children, trying to survive as a refugee in a foreign land. But he is not the only one to suffer in Congo. Recently he sent me this story.

Nearly 100 years ago the Lord called David Flood and his wife Svea, to leave Sweden and serve him as missionaries in Congo. They ventured out as pioneers with another couple to share the Gospel in a malaria infested region that was totally unreached. Their little team experienced unbelievable hardships, including total rejection by the chief of the village where they felt God was calling them to minister. After enduring repeated bouts of malaria, their teammates retreated to the safety of the main mission station. In the meantime, the Floods experienced one tiny glimmer of hope in their very bleak situation – a young boy finally did accept the Lord Jesus as his Saviour after they had patiently built a friendship with him.

Unfortunately, Mrs Flood, died shortly after giving birth to their second child. Heartbroken and totally disillusioned, David Flood, left the mission field, taking his oldest boy but leaving his newborn daughter, Aina, with the other missionary couple. Embittered by these awful hardships and tragic losses he renounced his missionary calling and totally rejected God. On returning to Sweden, he started drinking alcohol and ended up wasting the next 45 years of his life.

In his latter years, he met his daughter who was brought to America as a 3 year old by her adoptive parents. Eventually she ended up marrying a minister with a heart for missions. At about 45 years of age she stumbled on a Swedish religious magazine that showed a picture of her mother, Svea Flood, and recounted the unbelievable hardships her parents endured as they witnessed in remote part of Congo and led a little boy to Christ.

The article went on to describe “How, after all the whites had left, the little African boy grew up and persuaded the chief to let him build a school in the village. The article also described how gradually, the now grown up boy, won all his students to Christ ... even the chief had become a Christian. Today (1963) there were 600 Christian believers in that one village.

Because of the willingness of David and Svea Flood to answer God's call to Africa, because they endured so much but were still faithful to witness and lead one little boy to trust Jesus, God had saved 600 people. And the little boy, as a grown man, became head of the Pentecostal Church and leader of 110,000 Christians in Zaire.

Meanwhile, for Aina and her husband's 25th wedding anniversary, Christian friends presented them with the gift of a vacation to Sweden. There Aina met her biological father. An old man now, David Flood had remarried, fathered 4 more children and generally dissipated his life with alcohol. He had recently suffered a stroke.

Still bitter, he had one rule in his family: “Never mention the name of God because God took everything from me.”

After an emotional reunion with her half brothers and half sister, Aina brought up the subject of seeing her father. The others hesitated, “You can talk to him,” they replied, “even though he's very ill now. But you need to know that whenever he hears the name of God he flies into a rage.”

Aina could not be deterred. She walked into his squalid apartment, with liquor bottles everywhere, and approached the 73 year old man lying in a rumpled bed.

“Papa,” she said, tentatively.

He turned and began to cry. “Aina,” he said, “I never meant to give you away.”

“It's alright Papa she replied, taking him gently in her arms, “God took care of me.”

The man instantly stiffened. The tears stopped. “God forgot all of us. Our lives have been like this because of him.” He turned his face back to the wall.

Aina stroked his face and then continued undaunted.

“Papa, I've got a little story to tell you, and its a true one. You didn't go to Africa in vain. Mama didn't die in vain. The little boy you both won to the Lord grew up to win that whole village to Jesus Christ. The one seed you planted just kept growing and growing. Today (about 1964) there are six hundred African people serving the Lord because you and Momma were faithful to the call of God on your life.”

“Papa, Jesus loves you. He has never hated you.”

The old man turned back to look into his daughter's eyes. His body relaxed. He began to talk. And by the end of the afternoon, he had come back to the God he had resented for so many decades.

Over the next few days father and daughter enjoyed warm moments together. Aina and her husband had to return to America – and within a few weeks, David Flood had gone into eternity. At the time of his wife's death, it appeared to human reason, that God had led the young couple to Africa, only to desert them in their time of deepest need. It would be 40 yrs before God's amazing grace and his real plan for the village of N'dolera would be known. (The above account is an excerpt taken from a book, “Aggie: The Inspiring Story of a Girl Without a Country” by Aggie Hurst.)

David Flood's story is a testimony to how God fulfills his promise: “You shall call a nation that you do not know ... seek the Lord while he may be found ... let the unrighteous return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him, and ... pardon. ... my word shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:5-11)

We would not say David Flood was a good example of waiting on the Lord or persevering to the end, but the fact is, God rewarded him for serving in Jesus' name. Forty years later he saw the fruit of his labours. He also saw the amazing result of his wife's death, in keeping with what Jesus said, “truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24)

How true it was that the Lord showed compassion on David Flood, opening his eyes to recognize he had wasted 45 years of his life and allowing him the joy of being reunited with his daughter.

Some of us here today may not feel we have “gone off the rails” like David Flood, but maybe the Spirit is convicting us for other reasons. Perhaps we're luke-warm, following Christ at a distance. We've “abandoned the love we had at first” like the church of Ephesus in Revelation 2:4. Let us return to our first love and not waste our lives on secondary matters. Let us aim **above all else**, to seek wholeheartedly after the Lord so we “may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.”

I cannot think of a more fitting way to conclude this heart-warming meditation than singing a chorus composed by, Jason Upton, titled, “Oh Lord you're beautiful”.

Oh Lord, you're beautiful,
Your face is all I see,

For when your eyes are on this child,
Your grace abounds to me

Oh Lord, you're beautiful,
Your face is all I see,
For when your eyes are on this child
Your grace abounds to me

I want to take your word and shine it all around
But first help me to just, live it Lord
And when I'm doing well, help me to never seek a crown
For my reward is giving glory to you

Oh Lord, please light the fire
That once burned bright and clean
Replace the lamp of my first love
That burns with holy fear

I want to take your word and shine it all around
But first help me to just, live it Lord
And when I'm doing well, help me to never seek a crown
For my reward is giving glory to you

Oh Lord, you're beautiful
Your face is all I see
For when your eyes are on this child
Your grace abounds to me

Oh Lord, you're beautiful
Your face is all I see
For when your eyes are on

Appendix: Followers of Islam, the second largest religion on earth, are not unfamiliar with the idea of seeking God's face as found in Psalm 27. (cf. Surah 18:28) Can this heart-warming vision be a meaningful way for Muslims and Christians to discuss spiritual things? Some helpful suggestions are available online here: http://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/beautiful_name.html