

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Teach Us to Pray: Wait on the Lord”

Rev. Buddy Sexton

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Psalm 27:1-14

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?

When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes— they shall stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of the LORD; this I seek: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple. 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 set me high on a rock. Now my head is 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.

Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud; be gracious to me and answer me! “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, LORD, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off; do not forsake me, O God of my salvation! If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up.

Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence. I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

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

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Let me ask you this. When was the most afraid you’ve ever been in your life? Can you think of that moment when you were just really, really afraid? It may be that for some of us, we need to really think about it, but not for me. I remember taking flying lessons. I had flown solo using VFR (visual flight rules), meaning I could only fly if I could see the ground. It was my first time to take a long trip, so I was going to fly to Lebanon, Tennessee, all alone in this airplane. It was supposed to be a beautiful day – very clear flying. I get to about the Cumberland Plateau and notice a few puffy clouds. I just dodge those. And then there were more of those. I wondered if it was just because of the plateau, so I went up a little to get above them. You can see where this is going. Eventually, I was just in the clouds. A student pilot, flying along, who is always supposed to see the ground is completely in the clouds.

I get scared and use the radio to call for an emergency. But nobody picks up my transmission. All I know to do is keep flying. I think I know the direction I was supposed to be flying and how long the trip was supposed to take, but I wasn’t completely sure. Eventually I thought I had to be close, but regardless I was going to run out of gas so I had to land. I keep descending, but I’m still not out of the clouds. Then I start thinking that this is how people die. They hit a tower. They hit a hill. They don’t know where they are. I kept going down and down, and when I finally broke through the clouds, out of the corner of my eye I saw a runway

number. Out of God's sheer mercy, I took that thing and landed it on the ground. I went into the building with my knees knocking.

What do we do when we're afraid? When you're in the clouds of life and not really sure how things are going to turn out. You're under stress and anxiety and you can't really see where you're going. You don't know what the consequences are going to be or what the results are going to be.

I want us to look today at not only how to pray, but how did David pray when he was under stress. We don't exactly know the back story, but apparently people are trying to kill him. They are saying awful things about him and he is under great duress. The interesting thing – and I hope this helps you all – but for me it really changed and challenged the way that I pray under stress, because it is really different what David does and what I do.

And, if you're at all like me, my prayer is often: Lord, I know the answer. If you'll just do this, then everything will be okay. If you'll just answer my prayer the way I am praying it, everything is going to be fine. Yet, David doesn't do that.

If you're an outline thinker, there's going to be three points: private preaching, personal problems, and a positive perspective. Let's start with private preaching.

David is under stress and what is the first thing he does? Instead of going through the litany of what he's afraid of, he starts by saying who God is to him. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" God is light. What does that mean?

1 Timothy 6:16 (God) lives in unapproachable light; Psalm 104:2 The Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment; John 9:5 (Jesus said) I am the light of the world. But what exactly does that mean? It means illumination. It means the ability to see in the darkness. Darkness is scary. Not just when we are trying to get kids to sleep alone in their own room; it can be scary for you and me. When something frightening is happening to us, we can't see what's going to happen. We start running video tapes of what it could be, and there are some really scary things that our imaginations can come up with. Often our imaginations are worse than reality.

Some of you are old enough to remember the movie *Jaws* from 1975. It was Steven Spielberg's very first film. Big budget, timeline, the whole thing, and they built this gigantic mechanical Great White shark. But it wouldn't work. Day after day they had mechanics working on it, but it still wouldn't work. There is no shark in the first part of the film. Spielberg is trying to figure out what to do. He quotes, "I had no choice but to figure out how to tell the story without the shark... So I just went back to Alfred Hitchcock: 'What would Hitchcock do in a situation like this?' ... It's what we don't see which is truly frightening." And you'll remember, as scary as that big shark was, what was even scarier was the music playing when you couldn't see the shark. Your imagination just goes crazy.

That happens for you and me. What if I don't have enough money to retire? What happens if this diagnosis comes back a certain way? What happens if I'm worried about my child and don't think they're on a very good path? And on and on it goes. Things that I can't control. Things that I can't see what the result will be. I don't have a blueprint or a crystal ball. Where's the light here?

I'll give you an example from David's life. He had an affair with Bathsheba, and she bears a child. This little boy is dying a slow death right after birth. David, for seven days, won't eat, won't take a bath, he's in the same clothes. He just prays. When the child dies, David gets up, takes a bath, puts on fresh clothes, goes to eat. Nobody around him gets it. What does David say...where's the light? In 2 Samuel 12 he said, "The child won't return to me, but I'll go to him."

Now that's light. God has told him that when these little children die, they go to be with Him. You'll be reunited one day. While that doesn't make it any less sad, it does give you hope. God has put these little

beams of light all through the Scriptures. I know something about this. Some of you know that my son had brain cancer. We had those moments. Of course it was sad. Of course it was terrible. But then there were also those moments when we'd look at each other and say thanks be to God Almighty that we're not saying goodbye forever.

I remember once when we were sitting on a park bench after one of his treatments telling him that I was so sorry for what he was going through: 32 years old, married, with a 5-year-old son, with a whole life ahead of you. I can't even imagine. He looked at me and said, "It's going to happen to you, too." He was right. We just don't know when. Sooner or later, you want that light to know that we won't be separated forever. Death doesn't have the final word.

So, first of all David says God, You're my light – a light to my path. Second of all, he says the Lord is not only my light, but also my salvation, whom shall I be afraid of? So many times David knew that the Lord had rescued him. Remember the fight with Goliath? Saul threw a spear at him, and God made sure that it missed him. Saul sent a gang after him and they let him out through a window. David can recount all the times in his life that God has rescued him. We are supposed to remember that too. Lord, how many things have you already rescued me from? How many times have I been sick? How many accidents have You helped me to avoid? Who knows? God is always with you.

Years ago, at 18 years old, I went to the Air Force Academy. To set the hook they give you an orientation flight on a fighter jet. I'm with this Vietnam vet pilot, sitting next to him, and off we go. It was just incredible. Halfway through the flight, I asked him what I was allowed to do. Am I allowed to try and fly it? He said sure, so I'm holding the stick thinking how unbelievable this was. I then ask what else I'm allowed to do. He asked me what I wanted to do. I told him that I'd kind of like to turn it upside down. He said to go ahead, so I took the stick and the next thing you know, were upside down. I can look up and see the Rocky Mountains. It was amazing. Then I told him that I'd heard a lot about pulling Gs. He said that he'd pulled a lot of Gs and proceeded to show me. I was looking for the barf bag, not sure that I could even see anymore. We should have wrecked; however, I had somebody with plenty of power and experience with their hand on the stick.

God says, that's Me. You have free will. You can do a whole lot of stuff, but I've always got my hand on the stick. I'm a Sovereign God. I'm a Rescuing God. I've got you. There's nothing that will happen in your life that I didn't see coming. A lot of it you won't like, and that's okay, but know that I've got you. David knew that He was a God of salvation.

Finally, David says that the Lord is not only radiant, and the Lord is not only a Rescuer, but the Lord is also a refuge. The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Exactly who am I supposed to be afraid of if God is my stronghold? The word stronghold means a place of safety, a place of protection. Every one of us, no matter how strong, needs a shelter. Every single one of us needs a hiding place when life really comes crashing in on us.

If you've ever watched the show Survivor, you know they take all these people and send them out on a island to fend for themselves. The first thing they always do is build a shelter. Nobody wants the elements hitting them. My wife is afraid of thunderstorms. She grew up in Alabama and remembers the tornadoes. Everyone would rush out and go into the storm shelter, where the men would hold the handles of the hatch as the wind was blowing up above. She was so afraid. Every one of us needs a shelter. Jesus said, I am a shelter. When you're hidden in Me, I've got you in my right hand, and there is absolutely nothing that can pry you out of it. Nobody in My hand will ever perish.

Unlike us, David never prays about how God should answer his prayers, solve his fears, or resolve his problems. He just remembers who his Father is...that his Father is light, his Father is salvation, his Father is a refuge in times of trouble. Not only does David remember that, but we're told in God's Word that we are to remember it.

So, you might be thinking, what is this Bible exactly? It's a bunch of stories. There are some rules. I'll tell you what it is. It says in Romans, chapter 15, verse 4: Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us... [so that] ...**we might have hope**.

What does that mean? We have the story of Moses. He lost his temper. He murders somebody. He runs off to the other side of the desert for 40 years. He had long forgotten that he was prince of Egypt. He was just a guy hiding out, who now smells like sheep. And, yet, in one moment of time, there's a burning bush and God is calling him to do something for Him. Moses not only doesn't feel very qualified, but he can't even speak...and God is calling him to be a spokesman. We're not sure if he stuttered or something else, but he was the most unlikely person and God still wanted to use him.

Look at the story of Thomas. He walks with Jesus. He's with all the disciples. He sees all the miracles. After Jesus is crucified a lot of the disciples, even the woman, tell him that they've seen Jesus, that He is resurrected. Thomas isn't so sure. People don't come back from the dead. I mean, honestly, I'd have to see the wounds. Jesus doesn't give up on him. He accommodates him by showing up so he can touch His wounds. Maybe you feel like that. I'm here and a lot of this seems wonderful, but I'm analytical and pragmatic. I'm not sure all the little pieces fit together in my brain. All these spiritual Legos... Remember that God used Thomas, somebody just like that. He was the first missionary to India. He believed so deeply that he died a martyr's death.

We all have our stories. Even David did. He's going to fight Goliath and everyone is telling him that he's just a kid, just a shepherd. He knows that, but he also knows that God delivered him from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear, and that He'll deliver him from the Philistine. He remembers what God has done for him over and over, and has built up a little savings account of faith. He's starting to have hope as he moves through his life. In the midst of fear, remember God's role in your life as a radiant light, a rescuer, and a refuge.

David then goes on to say, "*One thing I asked of the LORD; this I seek: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.*" What David said is interesting. He's got problems. People are chasing him and he's under a lot of stress, but all he wants is to be with the Lord. He wants to know Him. He wants to really know Him. It's almost like when there's an emergency and the paramedics are called. The first they do is check the person's vital signs. For a Christian, the crucial vital sign is "Do you want to be in the presence of God?"

Seek God's face, not his hand. This is a loving relationship. It reminds me of getting a call from grown children, which is normally them asking for something...to borrow the vacuum cleaner, to babysit the grandkids, etc. It sure would be nice to occasionally get a call just to ask how we're doing, to find out what's going on in our lives. That's what God wants. He wants us to just want to be with Him.

Let's shift our focus to the personal problems. David, after he gives these lofty, wonderful things, suddenly becomes more like us. "*Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off; do not forsake me...*" I would say that you and I maybe do that, too. Does it keep you from praying? Maybe we think that God won't hear us when we do.

"Do not hide your face from me." Maybe we think that God is distracted. He's working Ukraine over here on the right. He's got crazy school shootings on the left. He's got COVID to deal with. The list goes on and on. And we have this one little thing that seems so trivial in comparison.

"Do not turn your servant away in anger." Maybe we think that God is disapproving. We've made mistakes. We haven't lived the kind of life we should have. There is stuff in our past that we're ashamed of. We don't want to pray because we don't think we deserve it.

“Don’t reject me or forsake me.” Maybe we think that God has deserted us. I hope that there is nobody here that feels that way. I think there was a moment in time that I did. A time when it felt like I’d messed so many things up that the Lord must be thinking that He’s had enough.

It’s not true. David ends up saying, “*If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up.*” Even though he may worry at times that God is distracted, disapproving, or has deserted him, he knows that God is always devoted. God is never more than just one thought away.

Now we get to the final part, the positive perspective. This wonderful psalm is teaching us how to pray, especially when we’re under anxiety. It comes to this great crescendo: *Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!*

I don’t know. I think I’m looking for a little more than that. Does that mean just buck up? Try to be tough? What are You saying here? I spend half my life waiting anyway. Waiting for water to boil, Comcast to arrive, COVID test results, drive-thru lines, doctor’s offices, I-40, airport security, traffic lights, stadium restrooms... teenage children to arrive home safely... someone to appreciate your efforts, or someone to say they’re sorry. We wait and wait, and sometimes it’s completely in vain. What does it really mean?

Part of it is that we don’t really know what the word “wait” means. We know what it means in English, but that’s not what it means in Hebrew. The Biblical “wait” is to look forward with eager expectation. It is waiting with the hopeful expectation that God’s at work. Maybe we can’t see it, but something is going on. Maybe what’s happening doesn’t seem good. While we might not always get to see the good results this side of Heaven, sooner or later every one of us will say that Romans 8 was true. Every single thing that was bad got turned to good when I followed the Lord. I don’t know how that worked out, but I see the tapestry now.

It’s interesting that when you look at this word and you really try to get the nuance of it. In 250 B.C., 70 Hebrew scholars translated the Old Testament into the modern language of the day, which was Greek. When they did, this word became two words, Hupo (“under”) and Meno (“abide”). What God is saying is that there are things that will come into your life that are frightening, that are difficult, and He is asking that you persevere – to abide under it. It’s a weight. He sees that. It’s hard to carry, but He’s asking you to continue to walk forward, not with blind faith, but with the expectation that He’s at work. Nothing will come into your life that didn’t go through His filters. He is still a sovereign God. Somehow this will end up turning out for good.

Hebrews 12:2 says, “...for the sake of the joy that was set before Him (Jesus) endured the cross.” It doesn’t say endured. It says, “...for the sake of the joy that was set before Him (Jesus) waited on the cross.” He abided under the misery of the cross because He knew the joy to come once it was done – the redemption of mankind.

James 1:2 says, “Blessed is the one who perseveres (“waits”) under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life.”

God wants us to have a hopeful expectation. He is still alive. He is still at work. There will be times when we have to abide under things, but we should not lose hope. Look forward with eager expectation for God to turn something bad into something good. When you’re under stress, remember that David moved from fear to faith by remembering that God is a help, a home, and a hope.

Let us pray.

Lord, I thank you for this time. I pray for all us here, Lord, that we might learn to want to be in your presence and to remember who you are in times of anxiety. If there is anyone here today who feels like they don’t have much hope, Lord, I just pray that this word would pierce their hearts and that you would, by your Spirit, lift them up. Use people, Lord, who feel like maybe they’ve been discarded. We thank you for Your Word and for your enormous love. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.