

Psalms for the Summertime: Psalm 27

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Psalm 27

So we return to our Psalms for the Summertime series, and before I read our psalm for today, let me remind you where we have been. We started off where the whole book starts with Psalm 1. Psalm 1 is a foundational psalm which tells us that the righteous prosper like trees by a stream and the wicked perish like chaff blown by the wind. Starting with Psalm 1 is like standing on a sunny hillside in pleasant weather with the sunshine of God's blessing falling on our face. But for the last three weeks we've gone out of the sunshine and into stormier places. The lament of Psalm 74. The despair and anger of Psalm 88. The confession of our sin in Psalm 32. We dove right in to all the places where life doesn't seem as tidy as Psalm 1, and we learned how God is in those places too, especially through the cross of Jesus. Over the next few weeks we will shift again. Over the next weeks we will be in psalms that are different from both Psalm 1 and from these stormier Psalms – 32, 74 and 88. These are psalms that help us live in the face of our troubles. There are 6 more sermons left in the series, and each of these psalms will ground us in habits of mind, and habits of the heart that will sustain us through life's hard places. These psalms are tools that the Holy Spirit will use to shape our hearts and minds into a place of resilient faith, resilient hope and resilient love.

Today we engage Psalm 27. As we read it you will hear parts of it that almost sound like a lament, but stronger than that lament, you will hear a positive hopeful tone. Stronger than the lament, you will hear the Holy Spirit forming something good and hopeful in the life of the psalmist, and in our life too.

I said that when we read Psalm 27, we do hear a voice of trouble, but stronger than the trouble we hear the Holy Spirit forming something good and hopeful in our lives. How is that so in Psalm 27? Well, let's start with the trouble. We don't know the precise trouble faced by the psalmist of Psalm 27. Verse 12 gets closest to describing it. 'False witnesses are breathing out malicious threats against me.' The psalmist has enemies, and those enemies are threatening him and telling lies about him. Or as other translations have it, false witnesses are breathing out violence. So someone in the psalmist's life is defaming his name and threatening violence. So that's the very rough outline of the trouble.

How does Psalm 27 teach us to face this trouble? What's wonderful about Psalm 27 (and this is one of the reasons it is so beloved) is that the psalmist is very perceptive about the way this trouble threatens him. This psalm has a deep, nuanced understanding about the way these malicious threats might mess up his life. This psalm understands that when we are going through troubles, we are in danger on two fronts. We face two threats. We have two things to deal with. A spiritually mature person is aware of both these fronts, both these threats.

What are these two fronts, these two threats? One front is really obvious. What would you be worried about if there were people who were lying about you and breathing out violence? You'd be worried about your personal safety! You'd be worried about the physical safety of you and your family. And the psalmist is clearly worried about that. "In the day of trouble, the Lord will keep me safe in his dwelling." That's the first front of his worry. Lord keep me safe. Keep my family safe. Protect us from harm. So trouble threatens us in this immediate physical front.

But if you read carefully, you see that the psalmist is worried about more than physical well-being. Look at verse twelve again. There the psalmist prays, "Do not give me over to the desire of my foes." That's an interesting turn of phrase. The psalmist doesn't pray, 'do not give me over to my foes;' he prays, 'do not give me over to the desire of my foes.' What is he worried about when he prays, God, 'please don't give me over to the desire of my foes?'

Well, the Hebrew word for desire is Nephesh. Do not give me over to the nephesh of my foes. Nephesh is a hard word to translate. It's most often translated as 'soul' or 'life.' If I were trying to describe the nephesh of a person I would say it is the whole of a person, body and soul, and the animating spirit that drives them. The nephesh of a person is their life and its spiritual orientation. The nephesh of a person is their character and constitution, their desires and their drives.

So that prayer, ‘do not give me over to the desire of my enemy,’ is less a prayer for personal physical safety, and more a prayer for moral and spiritual safety. The psalmist isn’t just worried that his enemy will kill him, he’s also worried that the desires of his foes, their values and ways, will infect him. “Do not give me over to the desires of my enemy.” “Lord don’t let their desires become my desires. Don’t let their passions become my passions. Don’t let their methods become my methods.” He’s worried that instead of his soul being animated by the breath of God’s Holy Spirit, he will start to breathe out murderous threats like his enemy. Verse 12 is less a prayer for physical protection from his enemy, and more a prayer that God will keep him from becoming like his enemy.

If what I’ve said so far doesn’t convince you of that, look at the verse right before it. “Teach me your way, Lord, and lead me in a straight path because of my enemies.” That is clearly a prayer for moral guidance and protection. The psalmist is worried about losing the path: losing his character, losing his integrity, losing his soul.

That’s the second front that faces us in our troubles. Our troubles always present a spiritual threat as well as a physical threat. These two fronts threaten us in all our troubles. When you lose your job you face the financial struggle that comes along with that (front one), but you also face the threat of bitterness infecting your spirit (front two). When you are struggling with chronic pain or weakness, you face the challenge of that physical pain, but also the danger of hopelessness and cynicism. When you get older and experience the diminishments of age, you face the physical challenges that come with those diminishments, but you also face the frustration and crankiness that easily rise in your heart as you live in a world that doesn’t seem to need you like it once did. Our troubles threaten us on two fronts: the physical front and the spiritual front.

These two fronts are connected of course. It’s a mistake to separate our physical and spiritual lives into two completely separate realms. Our physical life affects our spiritual life and our spiritual life affects our physical life, yet they are distinct. We fight differently on each of these fronts. We fight the physical side of cancer with chemotherapy. We fight the discouragement of cancer with prayer, and companionship, and cards, and words of encouragement.

Here’s a question: does the Bible make a judgment about which of these two fronts is more dangerous? I think the Bible is more concerned about that second front. Remember, Jesus says, ‘What good is it for a man to save his life and yet lose his soul?’ ‘Don’t be worried about those who can destroy the body, worry about the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell.’ And in this psalm, while the psalmist is clearly concerned about his personal safety, it is the second front, the state of his soul, that is the center of his prayer, the center of his concern.

This has something to teach us. In our current cultural climate, there are lots of worries about the church losing its place in society. We are losing our social place and our social power. Physically a lot of churches are shrinking. And we have more cultural foes. That’s a first front danger. That physical front is concerning. But I’m more worried about the second front of dangers. In these pressured times, I’m worried that we will be turned over to the desire of our enemies, to the spirit of our enemies: that hatred and fear will infect our spirit, that violence and lies and dirty tricks will become our tools. Or alternatively, instead of struggling to stay on the path, we could just give up trying to be morally distinct. We could morally surrender to the ways of the world. Either of these two paths would amount to giving ourselves over to the desire of our foes.

That’s the worry of the psalmist, but as we said, this psalm isn’t all worry; it’s ultimately hopeful. When we pray this psalm, the Spirit uses it as a tool to protect us on both fronts of this battle. As he faces his battle, where does the psalmist turn for help? What does the psalmist yearn for so that he can stay steady in the face of the desire of his enemy? He yearns for the face of the Lord. He wants to see the face of the Lord, the beauty of the Lord, the goodness of the Lord. “One thing I ask, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord.” “My heart says, ‘Seek his face.’ Your face, Lord, I will seek.” “Do not hide your face from me, Lord!” Lord, if I can see your face, I can do this! I can stay strong! I can stay faithful! If I can see your face I won’t give in to the desire of my foes.

And if you read carefully, you will see that there is a very specific practice that helps him see God’s face. There is a place the psalmist goes where God shows himself. Do you know what place that is? Could you hear it in the psalm? It’s the temple. Specifically, it is the worship of God’s people in the temple where God shows his face. The psalmist wants to worship so he can see God’s face. He wants to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of his life. He wants to go to the sacred tent where he will sing and make music to the Lord.

The vision of God's face keeps the psalmist strong in his troubles, and that vision is seen in the company of God's people at the temple, in worship. When we think about protecting ourselves from the desire of our enemies, in Psalm 27 the Holy Spirit recommends worship. The worship of God's people as a stronghold against the foes, because it is in worship that God shows us his face. And when we see his face, we can get through the stuff.

This is real. When we really worship together, people will often leave church and say things like: 'Wow that was great. That fed me. That strengthened me. I was refreshed.' You've heard that sort of talk. Maybe you've said that sort of thing yourself. I was reflecting on those statements and I realized that they are not intellectual statements. When people say that stuff, they usually don't mean to say, I learned something in the sermon. When people say, 'I was refreshed,' that usually has to do with an overall experience. Those words are an attempt to describe a spiritual encounter; they're saying that God met them in that service and refreshed them. That encounter could happen in the sermon, but it could just as easily happen in the last verse of a familiar hymn when everyone seems to be singing with extra energy. It could happen in the quiet of a moment of confession when all the people were still before the Lord – humble, waiting. It could happen in the postlude when Larry really opens up the organ. It could come in a moment when the sun comes pouring through the window behind me and the colors in the window become suddenly bright. It could happen in the benediction as you open your hands and lift up your head while the minister speaks those words about the Lord turning his face towards you and giving you his peace. In any one of these things or in all of them together something much more than intellectual learning is happening.

I think when the psalmist talks about a desire to see God's face, he's talking about what happens in those kinds of moments, because when those things happen, a peace that passes understanding guides and keeps our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. In those moments, God is turning towards us and showing us his face. And that's what we need right!? That's what we need to make it through our troubles. I may not understand my troubles, I may not understand your troubles, but if we get that glimpse, that's the food we need to get us through the week and keep our hearts from the desire of our foes. "One thing I ask of the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life and gaze on the beauty of the Lord." Yes, yes to that.

In 1965 Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy led a march for civil rights through Selma, Alabama. King and Abernathy represented the peaceful, non-violent arm of the civil rights movement. By then there were lots of civil rights activists who were calling for violence and revolution. Lots of them who had chosen the angry, hateful rhetoric of their oppressors. In my opinion, those people were giving themselves over to the desire of their foes.

That wasn't King and Abernathy. They wanted to walk the path of non-violence. They knew they would face opposition and trouble in Selma. Just two weeks earlier when people tried to march peacefully across the Edmund Pettis bridge, they had been met with tear gas and billy clubs and dogs. 50 people were hospitalized. Understandably, the marchers were anxious about the march and the potential for violence, and so the day before the march, they gathered for worship. And guess what psalm they read in their worship? They read Psalm 27. "The Lord is my light and my salvation. The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Lord let us see your face. Do not give us over to the desire of our enemies." The next day they walked through town. They were jeered. They were greeted by signs that said 'n-word go home.' But in the spirit of Psalm 27 they stayed steady and strong and hopeful and did not give themselves over to the desires of their foes. It was the face of God in worship that helped them, that preserved them.

And God is doing the same thing, here, today, in this place: showing you his face, telling you it will be OK. It's the same thing he did when he sent his Son. In Jesus, God showed you his face, and that face shone upon you, told you not to fear. Jesus of course endured the same thing as the psalmist: false witnesses breathed out murderous threats against him. They didn't just breathe out violence, they acted out violence and nailed him up. But he never gave himself over to the desire of his foes. He stayed true to the path of grace and truth and life. And as Christians in our worship it's his face that we see, and it's his life that the Spirit is growing in us. Telling us that we will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living, encouraging us in all our troubles, to be strong. Take heart, and wait for the Lord.

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