

# *Afraid... And Not*

**Bible Reading:**  
**Psalm 56**

PREPARED BY  
KEN GEHRELS  
PASTOR  
CALVIN CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH OF OTTAWA  
ONTARIO, CANADA

Have you ever been afraid?

Perhaps waiting in the doctor's office after the urgent phone call to come in.

Perhaps unsure of a recently completed crucial exam.

Perhaps having received a layoff notice, knowing the bills will keep coming.

Perhaps having to go to school, and dreading the recess times alone.

Fear - where what is to come, or the situation in which you are right now seems very negative, destructive, unpleasant and gives you great concern about what will happen -

heart begins to race

nerves may be strung out

Can Christians be afraid?

Or is it a sign of a weak faith?

Can real Christians be afraid?

How can we face the very real challenges of life, the pains, the damage?

How can we do that without sinking into dark despair, or quivering terror?

Ignore the bad? Good, positive thinking?

Power theology?

Allow a time to linger in reflection on the dark experiences?

Or what?

Jacques Ellul, a French brother in Christ, suggests that Christians don't want to be optimistic, or pessimistic. Christianity is a faith that is neither optimistic or pessimistic. Rather, he says, it is **realistic** about life here on earth.

**Optimism**, says Ellul, is an attitude of hyperinflation acting on the victories and positive events in life, blowing them up to the point of phoniness.

**Pessimism** is an attitude of dejection which ignores God's grace and mercy and sinks us into despair.

**Christian realism**, says Ellul, balances a healthy sense of the damage that sin has brought into creation with a trusting hope in the truth of God's ultimate victory over sin and evil and death.

Hold on to those questions and go with me to Psalm 56.

In the Bible book of the soul, where the deepest emotions and thoughts of believers are laid out before us, we can reflect on such concerns.

### **READ PSALM 56**

Let me begin by suggesting this -

We deal with fear by

- accepting its reality and

- learning to trust in the middle of it.

A faith-based *realism* along the lines of what Jacques Ellul defines.

Think, for example, of sitting in the ICU waiting room, helpless, while the doctors work on your mother behind those closed doors.

What is going to control your response?

Fear is there, no doubt!

The reality is that things are very uncertain. Will she live, or not?

You simply don't know.

But here's the key -

We can focus on the source of the fear... OR

We can concentrate on who Yahweh is, and that He is trustable,  
even in our times of anxiety.

We don't have to deny or squash the emotions we are experiencing, emotions in the face of uncontrollable life situations. Though some may suggest that!

Consider this old slogan from Roosevelt, spoken in the midst of the Great Depression -

*The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.* [F.D. Roosevelt, 1933]

Fear itself is not a terrible thing.

It's really just an indication that some situation or another is bigger than we are;  
some bigger, difficult, potentially harmful, uncontrollable situation.

How does the Psalmist respond in his uncontrollable situation, when he is filled with emotions of uncertainty and fear?

He builds a secure foundation.

He builds the equivalent of a net under the high wire which will catch him **when** (notice I didn't say **if**) he falls.

Notice verse 4:

*"In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I am not afraid."*

He builds a safety net under his precarious situation;  
a safety net woven together out of God's Words.

Now, words may not seem so terribly secure.

After all, given our experience

- with our own words

- with the words we receive from others

How dependable are they?

We need to remember that "*Word*" in Hebrew means not only the spoken phrases, but also the actions which accompany the phrases.

So when the Psalmist says "*In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I am not afraid*" he's talking about

- What God says, **and**

- What God ***follows through on.***

He goes back to his own experience, and the experiences of others that he has seen and heard about.

It is those that make him understand that God is worth putting trust in – especially in risky, uncertain times.

There's a progression that David goes through in his difficult time, his afraid time; a progression he goes through as he begins to focus on God's spoken and acted Word, as he weaves a safety net for himself from that divine Word -

Step 1 is found in verse 3:

David says "I ***am*** afraid." He admits the fear.  
It is there. Right now. Very real.

Step 2 - same verse:

*I put my trust in you*

Herewith a little seasoning with Hebrew grammar:

"*I put my trust*" is an imperfect verb, in other words a Hebrew form that indicates incomplete, ongoing action. It is something David is busy working at. He's not done with it. He has to keep working at it.

He has to keep working at putting his trust in God.

Which is no different for any one of us.

You see, just like every other part of faith life, learning to trust in God is something that needs continual work. The moment we stop and begin to depend on what we had built up before, we find that it starts to go backward. It begins to decay.

The moment in faith that we stop moving ***forward*** we will find ourselves moving ***backward.***

That's always how it is.

So, in a world that gives plenty of opportunity for uncertainty and fear, we have to keep working at the project of trust-building;  
of building the safety net of God's Word  
a safety net that a dangerous world, and a devilish foe seek to unravel.

That's verse 3.

From there we move to verse 4:

v.4 *In God I trust* – now the verb is in the perfect tense; and in Hebrew that indicates completed action.

When trust rests in God, ***that's***, then, how David can say - "***I am not afraid***".  
Present tense.

The poison of fear finds its antidote in God, through a trust in Him.

Where God stands.....

in His strength  
in His security  
in His wisdom  
in His love  
in His presence.....

Where God stands, fear can not dominate the day.

What we're witness to in Psalm 56 is a process,

a movement,  
of managing our fears through growing, developing trust in the Lord.

And as that happens, we become able to say with David -

- end of verse 4 -

*What can flesh do to me?*

*Flesh* is the word to refer to limited, often off-track, weak people.

*Flesh* refers to those who can behave in - yes - barbaric ways with our bodies (witness what has happened over the last few months to hostages taken by terrorists in Iraq) and who can meddle into our minds but who **cannot** reach anywhere near the human soul;

cannot maim it;  
cannot destroy it.

As Marva Dawn translates it, "*What can mere human assailants do to us when God is on our side?*"

Melting away fear through a trust in the power and presence of God.

I think of those who go into obvious dangerous places to serve the Lord in mission work or with relief agencies -

Have they been ignorant?

Have they been foolish?

Or is there a deep wisdom which is aware of the outer risks, but sees a deeper challenge and an eternal security?

Or those who give assent to uncertain surgery and can be wheeled calmly into the operating room?

Are they just quietly resigned; have they given up?

Or do they know about a greater future beyond the present struggles of the body.

Or believers who face unemployment, and yet still are able to sleep through the night -

Are they avoiding reality?

Or have they become aware of God's greater power to provide?

Yes, there are many sometimes rather twisted situations and people that we can face in life.

And yes, reality would suggest they could be a real cause for concern.

But for believers, they need not be the end of the road.

They need not be the cause for debilitating fear.

Hear words to challenge the terrors that strike at us:

*Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin.... if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the over, will he not much more clothe you - you of little faith?*

[Matthew 6:28-30]

*I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

[Luke 12:4-7]

*We know that all things work together for good for those who love god, who are called according to His purpose.*

[Romans 8:28]

*Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Yet these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands...*

[Isaiah 49:15-16]

Can you see the depth and security that these Divine Words offer?

What are you afraid of?

- the doctor's report..... or the lack of one?
- red ink at month's end if you stick to your morals?
- hanging on to your job?
- being harassed on the campus because of proclaiming and living the claims of the

Bible as enduring truth?

Think of christian heros - through the ages and across the miles.

Perhaps consider the ones in Hebrews 11.

Every November we consider the plight of brothers and sisters in places of persecution.

And every November many of us wonder, "*How would WE cope in those circumstances?*"

They persist in their witness and their work for justice.

Do we?

Can I suggest something?

One of the things that our Christian Reformed heritage has not been very active in promoting is the event of sharing stories of God's work among us, within our lives;

of giving testimony.

And yet, you know, as believers have experiences, and then in reflection are able to relate those experiences to confirmed promises in the Bible,  
and if they **share** about those experiences  
it can be **incredibly** supportive and encouraging to fellow believers.

I recall one fellow who would quietly share an experience he had.

It was difficult for him to do, because he was raised in a time when you were trained to be silent on such things. But he shared about his experience as a resistance fighter in Europe during the War. He told how one night he had to move across a particularly dangerous piece of road. Suddenly, quietly, he noticed a figure moving alongside him, in the ditch. The figure didn't say anything, but quietly kept pace. When this man finally came to safe cover on the other side, the figure disappeared. After telling his wife, she said, "*it must have been a guardian angel from the Lord!*" Which it was.

What confirmation that we are never alone.

Another brother, from this congregation, has shared with those he knows about a time he lay near death. Uncertain about what was coming, he had a vision. He saw an almost indescribably beautiful place, with faces he recognized who had already passed away. He woke up from that, and with a huge, peaceful smile is able to assure those he knows that death is **NOT** the end and **NOT** the worst thing that can happen to a believing person —  
— he, in fact, now looks forward to it.

I've heard people share about how, during financially tough times, they were able to prayerfully lay their needs before God and discover amazing so-called coincidences of how the right garage sale would turn up the clothing they needed for their kids, or the quick sales table had the right product at the right time, or a bit of part-time work showed up, or a friend offered support when the cupboard was empty.

Share the stories, people.

Share them well.

And in the sharing, point each other to the cross.

For there we see **THE** Word of God.

There we see God's promises delivered and lived to the fullest.

We see that promises which God made centuries before are not forgotten, but time is carefully sculpted in order to see to their perfect fulfillment.

Point each other to Jesus,

who in His victory over death provides us ultimate deliverance from the powers of fear and uncertainty.

And also - share the stories of Scripture, where we see the promises and Words of God lived out.

Share the stories, and share the spoken promises.

Here's another thing we don't see too much of any more - memorizing Scripture.

How many promises of God can you recite by heart?

Ah yes, compared to David, we are **hugely** blessed. We have the written word readily available, where he didn't. And so we may say that we can find them when you need them.

But do you know when we will need them the most?

At a time when we won't have a bible handy, or having one won't be able to read it.

I remember a former parishoner who faced a life-threatening neck operation.

It could kill him.

Or leave him paralyzed.

John said to me, "*As they were wheeling me into the operating room, the words I had memorized as a child, the words of Psalm 27 came to my mind. I began to recite them. I kept saying them. And the anxiety disappeared.*

On that stretcher he had no bible. But the Holy Spirit reminded him:

*'The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?'*

*'The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?'*

*'The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?'*

*'The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?'*

Which He is - our light and our salvation.

Our safety net in a very unsafe world.

He delivers our souls from death.

And our feet from falling.

In Him, fear truly meets its match.