

Psalm 27

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[0 : 00] This is one of my favorite Psalms. I've never preached on it before, so I'm glad to get the chance to do that. There's lots of different ways you could explore the Psalm, you could look at the Psalm, lots of angles, lots of things to draw out from it.

But I think one of the very centerpieces of it, the most, one of the most important subjects that arise in it is the problem that every single human to some degree faces, and that's the problem of anxiety, of anxious thoughts.

So I think that's very, very clear here in Psalm 27. We're in a summer series on various Psalms that basically allows for different guest preachers to come in and preach from the Psalms wherever they like.

And one of the things that's great about that is that no matter where you go in the book across all five books of the Psalms is that you realize the Psalms are here for us, that they really are God's gift to every single one of us.

One of the reasons for that is because they very frequently and typically deal with the emotional life, with our emotional lives. And it's important just to say that we are emotional.

[1 : 03] Now I don't mean by that always melodramatic or something. You can be emotional to varying degrees, but we're all emotional. There is never a time in life where you are not emotional, and that means a person that is exercising emotion.

You can never get away from being emotional. It's what we are, it's what a human being is, it's part of the faculties of our soul. And so we are always either happy or sad or somewhere in between. We are always either in peace or in turmoil.

We're angry, we're calm. There's never a time where we're not experiencing emotion. And so the Psalms give us this gift of telling us how to deal with our emotions, of showing us that there's a Christian way, a right way of dealing with your emotions.

The second great gift that we get here is that when you read the Psalms, one of the things you realize is that the problems that ancient people faced are the problems we face.

And the problems that modern people face are the problems that ancient people faced. That because we're all human, we pretty much have the same problems. Just in different registers, in different contexts, to different degrees for different reasons.

[2 : 08] And so just very simple. One of those is very clearly the problem of anxiety. It's a problem that human beings have been dealing with since Genesis chapter four. Now we did a long series on anxiety in 2022, but I just wonder if anybody in here has been anxious since 2022.

That's a reason to come back to it again. We'll never graduate from talking about the problem of anxiety. It's one of the premier issues of the modern person. And so here we are back again.

Let's think about David's anxiety here and what it says about our anxiety. And then secondly, I think the Psalm gives you very briefly, very quickly, a few helps on how to deal with the problem of anxiety across the whole spectrum of your lifetime.

So first, David's anxiety and what it says about our anxiety. So one of the things to see is just the reality, the fact, the presence of David's anxiety in the Psalm. So this is a Psalm from David.

And in verse one, he says, "'The Lord is my light, my salvation.' And then he asked this question, "'Whom shall I fear?' Now if you just scan your eyes from verse one through verse six, you will see that David is talking to himself in the first six verses.

[3 : 24] So he's not talking to God yet. He's talking to himself. So he says, "'Whom shall I fear?' For example, verse two, "'When evildoers assail me.'" He's talking to himself over and over and over again.

And so the big theme of what he's talking to himself about is in this question, "Whom shall I fear?" And then the very next sentence, "The Lord is the stronghold of my life." And here's the parallel question, "Of whom shall I be afraid?" Now the second time the word fear shows up, "Whom shall I fear?" And then, "Of whom shall I be afraid?" In the second question, it's not the same word in Hebrew.

And the first of whom shall I fear is the very normal typical word for fear. And then in the second, the Hebrew word is the word shiver. So he says, "Of whom shall I fear? Who shall I fear?"

Of whom, who makes me shiver? Who makes me tremble? Who makes me shake in my boots? You know, that's what he's saying in the second question. And that means that we know that he's talking about some situation in his life that is making him very afraid.

What's the context? Why is he saying this? Because he is afraid. David is very afraid here. He is shaken in his boots. And so he's talking to himself to try to deal with this problem that he faces, the problem of fear.

[4 : 37] What is it that's making him afraid? Verse two, we learn, he says, "When evil doers assail me to eat up my flesh, that's a metaphor for a pack of dogs or a pack of animals.

It's a metaphor for people that are chasing him.' He says, "Like animals trying to eat up his flesh, like animals would.' And then he goes on and on several times.

Verse three, "And though an army, if maybe an army encamps against me, goes to war against me." And the list goes on like that. And you get the sense that David is facing a fear where somebody's trying to take his life.

And it seems like he's both afraid of a real threat. Somebody's trying to take his life. And also there's something more going on than that. Now, let me say this, fear is good.

So one of the things that's happening in David's life and that happens in all of our lives is we get afraid sometimes. Fear is good. God gave us the gift of fear from the moment of Genesis 3, 4.

[5 : 40] But even before that, we know that the fear of the Lord, there's a good type of fear, the fear of the Lord, the beginning of all knowledge. And there's other good types of fear as well. So if you are out and about right now during the fringe, and you're trying to cross over the royal mile, right outside our doors, one of the things that has undoubtedly happened to you is that you've stepped out and you've realized that there is either a taxi or a giant bus trying to push the people out of the way, right?

Honking the horn. And you've had to, at some point in your time around St. C's, back up. Right, and in that moment, your autonomic nervous system triggers.

And you know, I need to get out of the way or I'm going to lose something here, right? Now that's good, that's very healthy fear. You need that fear. If you don't have that fear, you won't stay alive. Right, so God actually gifts us the gift of fear. So there's good fears and there's bad fears. And sometimes fears are not healthy. Sometimes fear is not good.

And I think what's happening in this passage is David is experiencing both good fear and bad fear. On the one hand, the good fear, there really is somebody clearly chasing him and trying to kill him.

[6 : 53] And when you have that type of real objective threat in your life, a threat that I'm imagining most of us have never experienced, it makes total sense to be afraid. And to seek refuge and protection, right?

And on the other hand, what's happening here is David seems to be maybe in the quiet of the night doing what all of us do in the quiet of the night. And that's putting his head down on a pillow and letting that very real threat become more than just fear, good fear, but a sense of dread and fearfulness that has the ability to go out of control.

In other words, to catastrophize in every direction. And one of the reasons we can say that is because when you get down to verse 10, he says, my mother, my father, my mother, they have forsaken me, but the Lord would take me or will take me, would take me in.

Now, there's a couple of ways to translate that, but one of the ways you can translate it is that it very well could be saying, if even my mother and my father forsake me, the Lord would take me in to his house.

Meaning he is thinking very probably here about a hypothetical, that if this got so bad that my own parents reject me, because somebody else is clearly rejecting them, then I would at least have the Lord.

[8 : 19] He's talking to himself and he's construing hypothetical circumstances of loss. And what is that? That's called anxiety. You see, there's good fear in our lives, the fear of the Lord and the fear

that keeps us alive.

And then there's a state of fearfulness. And anxiety is one of the types of bad fear, it's a state of fearfulness. Anxiety is anytime we allow real threats that do beget, produce fear in our lives to become states of fearfulness, where we construe hypothetical circumstances of loss that don't actually exist.

So another way to say it is anxiety is the act of playing the prophet or catastrophizing. We take real threats in our lives and we take them to the uttermost extreme and play the prophet, hypothetical imagination of things that we could lose if this goes all the way, if this gets as bad as it could get. And that's a basic definition of common anxiety. Now David here is clearly, to some degree, fighting, struggling with the threat of anxiety.

And boy, it's a problem that we face, all of us to some degree. I think I've met a couple people in my life that are not anxious, that don't have anxiety.

[9 : 43] But the rest of us, we struggle with it. According to the National Institute of Health and a bunch of other bodies that have done a deep dive into the issue of modern anxiety, anxiety diagnoses have steadily increased in the Western world, in the Anglophone, the English-speaking world, since about 1955 and forward.

And today, the National Institute of Health in the United States, which is one of the biggest bodies of health research in the world, National Health Institute, I should say, says that one in five people in the Anglophone world, the English-speaking world, in Great Britain, in America, in the West suffer from a diagnosable anxiety disorder of some kind.

Now, there's all sorts of ways to look at the stats. But one of the things that's really clear, no matter what you look at, at what angle, where you're standing, is that people are more and more anxious than they've ever been.

It's an ancient problem, but it seems to be an increasing modern problem, a modern problem that won't go away, that's getting worse and worse. We are more comfortable than we've ever been. We suffer less than any other people in human history, and we're more anxious than ever.

We're more anxious than any generation. And I don't know if you've got the chance to see one of the New York Times bestselling books, Jonathan Haidt's recent book, *The Anxious Generation*, a wonderful new book, where he explores the reality of this through the lens of a case study in Gen Z and why it is that people are so much more anxious.

[11 : 15] And he talks about the issue of the smartphone and the creation of the iPhone, the social media like button, the call that we are all made in this modern world to curate our identities in the public square.

So many issues, so many ways you could get at it, but one of the things I think it's very important to say is that while anxiety is increasing, it is a problem that has been around since sin entered the world.

And we see it right here in Psalm 27. And one of the great things is that the Bible, long before the psychologists, long before Freud ever existed, the Bible, God's word comes and gives us help to deal with the deepest part of our souls, the psychological issues that we face.

And that's what the Psalms do so often. All right, second, let's ask, how does the Psalm address, how does the Psalm offer some help? Just very briefly and we'll be finished.

Let me give you five ways, I'll run through these. Five ways this Psalm tells you that it gives you an opportunity, a chance to deal, to fight anxious thoughts, to fight the sense of dread and angst that can overcome the soul.

[12 : 22] Five ways, and it really is something we have to fight for. The first is this, we learn at the very beginning of the Psalm verses one to six, I've already pointed this out, but let's make it into an application.

One of the first things we see David do is as soon as anxiety comes into his life, fearfulness, he talks to himself. And one of the things that you've got to do when anxiety comes into your life, this right here in the scripture, is you've got to talk to yourself.

And that's what he does, and you see that, he says, he's talking to himself, whom shall I fear? He's talking, he's looking at his own heart and saying, heart, what are you doing?

Why are you so afraid? Why are you so fearful? He's talking to his own heart, he's talking to himself. We say it more commonly today, you've got to preach to yourself, he's preaching to himself here at the very beginning.

And another way to say this, this is, the Puritans talked about this a lot, but it's right here in the Bible as well, in Psalm one and Joshua one, there's this word that's translated meditation in Psalm one, and meditation in Joshua one, which are both the starts of new sections of the Bible.

[13 : 29] You've got the law, the first five books, and then the next section, the prophets, in the original Hebrew Bible, which begins with Joshua. And the very first thing you're told on chapter one is, meditate on God's word.

And then you come to Psalm one, and the very first thing you're told in the third and final section of the Bible is, meditate on God's word. This word meditate, meditation, what is that? Meditation, Christian meditation, this command we're given, is something between reading scripture and prayer.

It's something in between. And it's where you take what God has said, and then you talk to yourself about it. And then you allow talking to yourself about it to roll into prayer.

That's meditation in Psalm one and Joshua one. And here it is, David's doing it. It happens, check out Psalm 103 for another great example. It happens all over where the Psalmist talked to themselves, and we've got to talk to our hearts.

I read a story this week about a man who was fired from a very successful tech firm in the United States. He had worked his way up the ranks in the tech firm, and he had gotten just below the very top.

[14 : 40] And he thought that he was going to get everything. He thought, and he went into a job interview, he went into the moment where he thought he was about to receive the pinnacle job of his career, and they fired him.

And he wrote an article, and he talks about how, because he had been so high on the corporate ladder in this tech firm, when he lost his job, for two years he couldn't get another job.

And the reason is because he was too successful for starter jobs, and yet he had got fired at the top, which means nobody else wanted him at the top.

And so he was in a strange place where nobody wanted him. Everybody interviewed with, you've got too much on your CV for us, or I'm sorry, but we're not going to put you in a position you couldn't get at the other firm.

And he writes in this article, that was the context. What he says in this article is he said, every day I started after a couple months to get up, look in the mirror, and say to myself, you're a failure, you're a failure, you're a failure.

[15 : 41] And he said, boy, he said, I'm not an emotional man, but the power of that language, talking to myself day after day and saying, you're a failure, you're a failure, you're a failure.

He said, I really believed it. He said, it was the fundamental core of my identity. He said, it defined my soul. Now look, talking to yourself has real identity-shaping power.

And we see that, it happens all over the Psalms. And the beauty of the Bible, the beauty of what's on offer here is this, that he was experiencing low self-esteem.

And if he came to talk to the psychologist, they would say, well, you know what you need, you need high self-esteem. So you need to wake up every day, and instead of saying, you're a failure, you're a failure, you're a failure, you need to wake up every day and say, you're a success.

You've got what it takes, you know? You can really do it, you can win, you're the best. And the Bible says, you don't need low self-esteem, you don't need high self-esteem. Low self-esteem, of course, is bad, but high self-esteem won't help you either.

[16 : 46] And there's this beautiful moment in 1 Corinthians 4, where Paul says, I care not about what the human courtroom says about me. So he says, if I ever go before the court, and I'm convicted, he says, I care not what they say.

You know, what I've done, what they say about me is not the core of my identity. And then he turns around on the flip side, and he says, and I don't care about what I say about me. Paul says, I don't care about what the court says, I don't care about what I say, the only voice that matters in my life is what God says about me.

And one of the very first things we learn here is that when you are beginning to feel anxious, fearful thoughts, you've got to talk to your heart, and you've got to tell it, the only thing that matters right now is what God says about you.

The only thing that matters is not, what's not what the people out there say, it's not what you say, because you will condemn yourself. What matters is what God says, and what does David do, and

he's saying, in the midst of this dread, he's saying, the Lord is my light, he's told me that, the Lord is my salvation, he's told me that, the Lord is my refuge, he's told me that, if my father and mother forsake me, the Lord has told me, I will let you in my house.

You got to talk to your heart about God, that's the first thing. Now we'll be brief for the next few. The second one, the second one we learn here, is that just simply means, secondly, that we learn here that the inner life is the most important thing that we need to deal with in our day to day lives.

[18:19] The inner life is more important than our circumstances. One of the things I think you read across the sense of this Psalm, is that God is not promising here, that he's gonna get David out of this mess, whatever the mess it is here.

And you can see it in verse five. In verse five says, he's talking to himself there, he says, God 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.

Now do you think that David means there, in the midst of his bad circumstances? He says, look, I know if things get really bad, God is gonna hide me somewhere in the tabernacle. That's the first line, he will conceal me in the tent.

You know, he's saying God is literally gonna tuck me away inside the tabernacle somewhere and keep me safe. No, it's not physical, it's not literal. God is gonna lift me high upon a rock, he's not saying, you know, if it gets really bad, God's gonna put me up on that tall rock where they can't get to me.

That's not what he's saying, he's saying, what is he saying, he's saying, God will conceal me in his tent, meaning God will be present with me no matter what. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, God will be present with me no matter what happens to me.

[19:29] That's the promise, that's the hope here. The inner life is the most important thing.

There's no expectation here that casting your anxieties before the Lord is gonna get you out of hard circumstances.

Circumstances of fear, not at all, not at all. Just look at the life of Jesus, look at the life of the apostles, and we know that that's not the case. Instead, here the promise is that he can protect your heart.

Taking your heart to God, talking to your heart about what God says about you will be protection and peace for your heart. That's the promise of Christianity. Third, just like you've got to talk to your heart, you gotta inner dialogue, you gotta talk to yourself about what God said about you.

The third thing we learn here is you gotta talk to God about what's going on in your heart. So from verse seven all the way down, what we see here is that David, he prays.

So the first six verses is him talking to himself. Verse seven to 14 is prayer. So he says, Hero, Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious unto me.

[20:30] So after he's talked to himself, he turns to prayer. Psalm one, read the word of the Lord day and night, meditate upon it, talk to your heart about what it says, and then turn to prayer.

So that's the exact method that we see here, the exact way that we see here. So it's just very simple. One of the most important things you can do, the most important thing you can do with your fears, with your anxiety is pray them.

Take them straight to God. As soon as you experience fearfulness in your life, pray, take it straight to the Lord immediately. That's the most important thing. I came across this week, a study also from the National Institute of Health in their journal where someone, a few scholars had written up a scholarly article about the relationship between prayer and anxiety.

Very interesting. Most often religion, spirituality is completely separate from the sciences in the modern world, right? But here they had said, we want to understand biological science and psychological science in relation to spirituality.

So they did this exploration of prayer and its effects on anxiety. So they used the Baylor University Religion Survey, which is a really big religion survey that gets conducted in the US from time to time.

[21:49] And this is what they said. They said, they asked, does prayer help in cases of diagnosed anxiety? And the conclusion they drew was sometimes, not always.

Okay. But then here's the interesting conclusion. Here's what they said the data showed. The reason it's sometimes not always. They said, what we found was prayer consistently helped lower anxiety and heal those who suffered from it.

When four conditions were met, they wrote when the person had a life of prayer that met with some certainty of frequency.

Secondly, when there was an expectation that they prayed to a God who actually heard them.

Third, when they prayed prayers of praise, prayers that included worship.

And then fourth, they wrote, I don't know, I only wrote three down. I had a fourth, it's not here.

[22 : 56] But that's a good three. But do you hear what they're saying? They said, sometimes it works. Well, what were the conditions? It was when a person prayed without ceasing, prayed to a God who actually listens, a personal God, and prayed not only prayers for their circumstances, but prayers of praise and worship.

Now, they noted at the very end that most frequently out of all the religions they surveyed, Christians were the one that came back with a positive response. Now look, the point here is not to say, is not to say, oh, you should pray because it's good therapy.

No, not at all. Instead, it's the exact reverse. It's to say that if God is real and God actually hears and God says, here's how you can deal with your soul, you pray real prayer to the real God with real expectation that it makes sense that it does help heal you.

Not because prayer is some type of subjective therapy, but because prayer is real and God is real.

You see, that's the point here. You gotta talk to God about what's going on in your heart.

All right, fourth of five. We learned here in verse six. It's very subtle, it's very brief. Verse six, he says, my head will be lifted up above my enemies all around me and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy, shouts of joy.

[24 : 20] I will sing and make melody to the Lord. He talks to his heart about God. He deals with his inner life. He lifts up his heart to God in prayer and then he says, and I go straight to the tent and I shout with joy and I sing and make melody.

He's saying that he goes to worship to sing. So one of the biblical prescriptions for fighting anxiety, this is not a secret, it's not, it's a lifetime, a lifetime fight, is to sing into praise and into worship, to make melody before the Lord.

He's talking here about the sacrifice of praise, that's how Paul puts it in the New Testament. He says that he lifts up his head. He's literally talking about there about his heart. My head lifts up, meaning metaphorically, my heart is raised up when I come into the tent and I sing praises and I worship and I lift my heart before the Lord.

We learn here that David just says, look, you gotta sing. Are you singing? Are you singing? Do you sing? Do you sing praises to the Lord?

It's a prescription of God's holy word to sing and that singing changes your life. We said this last week, but singing is the highest form of language.

[25 : 34] Poetry is elevated prose and music is elevated poetry and there's a real reason why in both the Chronicles of Narnia and J.R.R. Tolkien's mythology of the origins of Middle Earth, both of those spaces come about how through singing, music is what brings those creation orders into being.

It's very important, I think, in our tradition, in our context, I was thinking about this as we were singing tonight a little bit. Just to make a careful distinction, that giving yourself away to emotion in the midst of worship and singing is not emotionalism.

Not when you're singing words of truth, goodness, that are also beautiful. When you have truth and goodness combined with beauty, which we did tonight, thankful to these folks over here, then it is a good thing to let your emotions pour before the Lord.

That's not emotionalism. Emotionalism is when you're emotional without truth, goodness, and beauty. But coming to worship with truth, goodness, and beauty, and pouring your emotions, that's a good thing. And David does that here with shouts of joy.

It's one way to fight the problem of anxiety. Fifth and finally, and this is the most important. So just if you have a Bible, just take one minute with me to look at a few verses. Verse four, what is the most fundamental point of fighting anxiety in Psalm 27?

[26 : 54] One thing that I've asked of the Lord that I will seek after, that I could dwell in the house of the Lord to do what? Gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. Verse four, and then if you look down at verse eight and nine, you have said, God, here's the command of God, seek my face, and my heart says to you, God, you are face, Lord, do I seek?

I do seek. Don't hide your face from me, God. Don't turn me away. Don't hide your face from me. And then if you look down finally at verse 13, I believe, the number one way that he fights anxiety, he says, I believe I will look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. The number one way David says, you can fight anxiety as a Christian, is to hope and believe and know that you are going to one day see the face of the living God. We've been talking about the subjective that David here deals with, the subjective problem we face. How can my heart not sink to the bottom of the ocean in the midst of bad circumstances? That's the first four ways, but in the fifth way, it's not subjective, it's objective. So Christianity doesn't come, so important. So many pathways, philosophies, and religions of 2024 come and say, we can help you feel better.

[28 : 14] We can give you therapy, we can help your psychology. Christianity can do that, but not because it's grounded in subjectivity. The promise is objective.

The greatest fights, the greatest joy, the greatest hope of fighting anxiety, the greatest way to heal is to know objectively, I will see the face of the living God in the land of the living. You see, four times David says it, that his greatest hope in the fight against his fearfulness is no matter what happens in my circumstances, one day I'm gonna look at the face of God. Now let me ask you tonight, is that the heartbeat of your faith? Have you really registered that the Christian faith is most fundamentally one thing, and that's that you were made to see God in Christianity, the work of Jesus is all about giving that to you objectively.

Do you long to seek his face? David says, here, you've got to say to your heart, you've got to say, what do you say to your heart? You say, okay, heart, not loving the circumstance, you're very afraid, you're entering a state of fearfulness and anxiety, will you remember, will you remember heart, will you look, lift up your head and remember that one day you're gonna look upon the face of God in the land of the living?

[29 : 30] What do you have to be afraid of right now? What is it that's taking you so far into the path and ocean of fearfulness right now, if you have that? I'll conclude with this. In the book of Exodus, the Israelites came to Mount Sinai, to the mountain of God, and when they did that, remember that Moses came to the top and the Israelites stayed at the bottom, and God said to Moses, and he said to the Israelites, do not get any closer to me.

Do not touch the mountain. If you touch the mountain, you're going to die. You were, every single person, every single one of us tonight, every single person in the city was made to see God face to face, and when we open the scriptures, one of the things we realize is that God says because of our sin, don't get any closer.

You cannot see me. You know, Moses says, please Lord, let me see your face. I know this is what I was made for, and he said, I will hide you in the cleft of the rock and you can look at my back. You cannot see what you were made to see. You cannot see my face. And David here in Psalm 27, knowing what has happened all throughout the Old Testament, is sitting here saying, I know that one day, I will see the face of the Lord in the land of the living. What was his hope? What was his hope? David had, in some way, some sense, by the spirit had to have known. The promise of the covenant. You know, you open up Matthew one-one, and the very first description of Jesus Christ is son of David.

[30 : 57] Great David's greater son, Jesus Christ, the son of God who came into this world, the God that you could not see, the God that you could not step towards because of your sin, Jesus Christ has made him known.

When you could not go toward the Lord, the Lord took on human flesh and came to you. And you've got to know that in the middle of human history, when he said, whom shall I be afraid of? When Jesus Christ was hanging on the cross and he lifted up his head, and his enemies chased him. And he said, will I see the face of my father in the land of the living? He was forsaken in that moment. He bowed his head, and he went down, down, down, all the way to the pit of hell. He experienced hell so that when he arises, you could say with David, I know, I know, I will see the face of God himself, the face of Jesus Christ in the land of the living. Now here's literally the final sentence. Will you make the vision of God your greatest hope in this life? It doesn't happen in 24 hours.

[32 : 14] It is a day by day by day by day fight to say, I was made to see God, and that is the desire I actually want to have. To the degree that you can find your desires, your hope in seeing the face

of God, you will see a proportional decrease in your fearfulness.

That's a promise. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you deal with the problems of our psyche, of our psychology. And Lord, we are anxious people. We are fearful.

We today, tonight, some of us are fearful, fearful, fearful about something this week, about unmet hopes. We fear that they may never be met.

About the job we will never get, but we always wanted, and we fear that we are failures, about the relationship that we may be about to lose or have lost.

And we fear in our anxious thinking, if I don't have that, who am I? That's a few examples, Lord.

You know the real life example of every single heart in this room, and so give us, give us, give us, Lord.

[33 : 25] We pray a desire to see the face of Jesus in the land of the living more than the things we're afraid of losing. We ask for that in Jesus' name.

Amen.