

"Tossings & Tears"

Sermon delivered by Pastor Chris McLain on September 11, 2016
at First Baptist Church of Crowell, Texas

For the director of music. To the tune of "A Dove on Distant Oaks." Of David. A miktam. When the Philistines had seized him in Gath.

¹Be merciful to me, my God,
for my enemies are in hot pursuit;
all day long they press their attack.
²My adversaries pursue me all day long;
in their pride many are attacking me.
³When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.
⁴In God, whose word I praise—
in God I trust and am not afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?
⁵All day long they twist my words;
all their schemes are for my ruin.
⁶They conspire, they lurk,
they watch my steps,
hoping to take my life.
⁷Because of their wickedness do not let them escape;
in your anger, God, bring the nations down.

⁸Record my misery;
list my tears on your scroll—
are they not in your record?
⁹Then my enemies will turn back
when I call for help.
By this I will know that God is for me.
¹⁰In God, whose word I praise,
in the Lord, whose word I praise—
¹¹in God I trust and am not afraid.
What can man do to me?
¹²I am under vows to you, my God;
I will present my thank offerings to you.
¹³For you have delivered me from death
and my feet from stumbling,
that I may walk before God
in the light of life.

[Psalm 56, NIV]

Today marks 15 years since the largest and most devastating terrorist attack on American soil that's ever taken place. I personally have a number of clear memories from that day, even living far away from the events taking place. I'm sure many of you, if not most of you have memories of that day as well.

There's a picture from that day that I thought about sharing with you this morning, but I decided not to. I'll probably post share the story that goes along with that picture on Facebook later this afternoon if you're curious about it.¹ As far as pictures go, the picture is a pretty good one from a photographer's standpoint. It's perfectly vertical, it's geometrically balanced, one side and the other. It shows steel bars shining in the morning sun. Everything on the left is the north tower; everything on the right of the picture is the south tower. The photograph ran in newspapers all over the country on September 12, 2001. It ran in the New York Times. It ran in the Fort Worth Star Telegram. It ran all over the place, but it's rarely been shared publicly since that time.

In the very middle of the picture there's a man in midair, upside down, perfectly straight up and down except for the bending of his left knee. And He's falling. He is one of the estimated 200 people who jumped or were thrown from the towers on that day, one of the seven or eight percent of the people who were killed in those attacks in New York City on 9/11. According to the story, "some people who look at the picture see stoicism, willpower, a portrait of resignation; others [those who are our enemies] see something else—something discordant

¹ Tom Junod, "The Falling Man: An unforgettable story." September 9, 2016. <http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a48031/the-falling-man-tom-junod/>

and therefore terrible: freedom." The picture is mesmerizing. It is terrible and beautiful at the same time. It's beautiful because this man appears so calm and unafraid of death, even prepared for it.

But it's just one of twelve pictures that the photographer took of that man that day. Associated Press photographer, Richard Drew, took this photo standing near the towers as police officers, firefighters, officials were pointing out people as they were falling. He took twelve pictures of this man as he fell.

In the rest of the pictures he is not calm. He is not perfectly in line with the towers. He is tumbling through the air just like the others. He isn't free. It's a snapshot of murder.

Despite the fame of that picture, and the efforts of many reporters and survivor families, no one has been able to identify specifically who he was with any kind of certainty. Like the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, he represents all of those who were killed that day. So if you're like me, even thinking about this, you still feel the pain of that loss. Some here are too young to remember this taking place, but their world has been transformed just like ours has.

Today I want to talk to you about pain and suffering in an uncertain world. I want to talk to you about the experience of choosing one form of certain death over another—treading the line between fear and faith.

The superscription, that's the little note right before verse 1 in Psalm 56, tells us that this psalm is about David when he was on the run from King Saul, who was the king of Israel before he was. Saul tried to murder David on several different occasions, and in order to escape Saul this time, David fled to the city of Gath. Gath is one of the five Philistine cities, the ancient enemy of Israel. Gath is the city where Goliath came from, David's mortal enemy and adversary in his youth.

David was caught between Saul and between the king of Gath. David was caught with certain death facing him on both sides. He was out of the frying pan and into the fire. But as we will see, this is not a psalm that's just about David. It's a psalm that voices the lament of all of Israel. It's designed to be used as a prayer for all of God's people when they face times of fear and times of suffering; when the only thing that they have left is to hold onto their faith.

The crucial point, the crux, the focal point of this psalm is in verse 4, it says "In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"

With those words, David looks past his fear and places his faith in God. The answer to the question that he asks, that he poses to himself—it's a rhetorical question, the answer is certain. "What can mere mortals do to me?" The answer is, in the large scheme of things, "Nothing."

That's the point of the psalm, that's the heart of it, that's the message that we're supposed to take away, and we'll return to it, but I want to spend the bulk of our time together this morning looking at a different verse in the psalm. Look at verse 8 of Psalm 56. Verse 8 in the New International Version reads, "Record my misery; list my tears on your scroll—are they not in your record?"

If you're not using the New International Version this morning, you may notice that your Bible reads very differently from the way that the NIV does, and that's because this is a particularly difficult verse to translate into English because of what's being said and the uncertainty of the words and the structure of it.

Personally, there's a version that I really enjoy of this verse, a version that I find especially moving, the New Revised Standard Version. In that version it says, "You have kept count of my *tossings*; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?"

The King James and the New American Standard, if you use one of those say "You number my *wanderings*."

"Wanderings" is probably the best *literal* translation of this word. It's used other places in the OT in a similar way, but "misery," the word used in the New International Version, would also work because here in Psalm 56 the word "wandering" is used symbolically to represent grief and lament. The reason I like the version that says "You have kept count of my *tossings*" is that I think it creatively combines both of those meanings into one very vivid image.

It's like God is sitting at David's bedside, or wherever he stopped along the road or hidden out in the wilderness to try and escape, and God is sitting there next to David as he's sleeping, or as he's trying to sleep and he's *counting* each time—one, two, three, four—counting the times that David *tosses* and turns back and forth, rolling over and over, seeking to find some kind of rest, some kind of relief, even if only through sleep.

An old pastor that I know once told a story about a husband who had lost his wife. She passed away. It's a kind of grief that is impossible for me to even imagine, and it was a real challenge, of course, for this man's faith. And one day when the pastor was visiting with the husband, he shared this verse, and he said "Look at this verse, God knows exactly what you're going through. God is counting your tossings in the midst of a restless night. God is catching your tears and keeping them in a bottle. God cares for you, and God is *with* you, even in this."

It's a powerful verse for me as a pastor. I get to see people at their best and at their worst in their lives—I see them in the joy and celebration of a Sunday morning worship service, but I also see the depression of a long hospital stay. I get to see the celebration of a new life in baptism, but I also witness the deep darkness of a tragic funeral.

In the times when the dark parts of life seem to crowd out the light, in those moments my mind often returns to Psalm 56, "You have kept count of my *tossings*, (you record my *misery*, you number my *wanderings*); you list my tears, you keep them in your bottle."

This is the verse I look to in those kind of times because it reminds me the most that God is there in the very middle of our trouble, in the very worst that our life has to offer. It does not force God back, but instead it forces him to come closer, to draw near. This psalm is a promise. A promise that God will deliver us.

The second piece of verse 8 is about God recording or collecting our tears. This is also a very special image. It's as if every tear that we shed God collects in a bottle that he keeps, he adds the fresh tears to this container of remembrance.

In a dry wilderness environment like Israel (or say the Pease River Valley), preserving water, preserving fluids is important aspect of survival, and so this idea of God placing our tears into his wineskin—this shows us how precious they are to him.

Partly because of this verse, actually, in the Victorian Era, that's the 1800s in England, there were actual tear bottles became a popular kind of thing for people. Especially after the death of a loved one, some people would literally take and capture their tears as they ran off their face, and they would keep those tears in a bottle as a reminder of that person. Some of those tear bottles, I read, came with a special stopper that allowed the tears to just very slowly

evaporate over time. And the idea was that when the tears were finally all gone, then the time of mourning had come to an end, and the bottle was then kept as a reminder.

This practice actually moved into the United States. It's something that has been practiced here in our own country. During the Civil War there were stories of soldiers who gave tear bottles to their wives, and the idea was that the men hoped that when they returned from the war they would find the tear bottles full, as a symbol of their wives' devotion to them. Unfortunately, so many of those men didn't return from the war, and so I don't know and they didn't know what happened to them.

The third line of verse **8** in Psalm 56 asks the question, "Are they not in your record?"

The idea being that God keeps a record of each of our lives, and to be recorded in God's book is to belong to God, it's to be *known by God*.

In our times of distress, as we pray this psalm, we can have confidence in the fact that our troubles never go unseen by God. The record of our suffering in God's book is in assurance that God hears us and that he will respond to us. **verse 9** says "Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me."

By the power of God, by the testimony of the Spirit, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we know—we know—that God saves his people.

In verse 10 and 11 we return back to that theme we talked about earlier. It says, "In God, whose word I praise, *in the LORD* (Yahweh, the very name of God), whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me?"

The answer is, "Nothing."

Paul echoes these verses in Romans 8:31 when he says "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

And in this life, it often seems like there is someone who is "against us." It seems like these words the psalmist is saying here are spoken directly from our own hearts, that, "...my enemies are in hot pursuit; all day long they press their attack. My adversaries pursue me all day long; in their pride many are attacking me . . . All day long they twist my words; all their schemes are for my ruin. They conspire, they lurk, they watch my steps, hoping to take my life." [Psalm 56:1-2, 5-6, NIV]

Life feels like that. More often than we like to think about, more often than we like to admit, we feel that way. It feels like we can barely survive from one day to the next, much less get ahead in this world. It feels like people are surrounding us from every side, trying to tear us down.

But that is the *fear* talking.

By faith—by *faith*—we can say with the psalmist "In God I trust and am not afraid." By faith, "What can man do to me?" Nothing.

We can be like the photo of the falling man—calm, certain, free. Or like Paul was before Caesar—unshakable in his faith, even in the very face of being beheaded. Or like Jesus was before Pilate—innocent, silent, filled with the glory of the God. We can set our eyes—not on the *darkness*, not on the death that may lie before us—but on the *third day*, on the day of resurrection, on the day of deliverance. It is in that *light* that the psalmist concludes, in verses 12 and 13 he says, "I am under vows to you, my God; I will present my thank offerings to you. For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the *light of life*."

This talk about "thank offerings" sounds a little bit strange to us today, we don't perform offerings in the temple. We don't offer sacrifices. These words seem kind of foreign. If you were praying the psalm, they might be something that would kind of catch you and distract you for a moment, this idea of a "thank offering." But in the Old Testament a thank offering was an offering given after a salvation had been received. It was usually a meal that was shared with family and friends to thank God for deliverance that had occurred in your life, from illness or from some struggle that you were going through. David here says, "I have thank offerings to offer. I've already vowed I'm going to give them to you when you bring me through this."

So as we enter into a time of response here at the end of our service, I want to invite you to give a thank offering to the Lord. Give a thank offering for the gifts that you have received, for the deliverance that you have experienced in your life. You may want to pray to God and give that offering to him right where you are in your spirit, or you may want to share that with someone around you. I want to encourage you to offer a thank offering. There's something you can give thanks for this morning.

In a moment I'm going to pray, and then we're going to sing together, and as we sing, I want you to offer thanks to God. And if you need to make some other kind of decision this morning—if you would like to place your faith in Christ for salvation, for the forgiveness of your sins for the first time, I would encourage you to come forward. Or if you desire to be baptized like these young men, if you've not experienced baptism. If you have placed your faith in Christ and you want to follow that through with a public declaration of what God has done for you then you can also come forward and ask to be baptized this morning. Or if you'd like to join our church or make some other kind of special decision, or if you just need prayer, feel free to come forward as we sing in just a moment. Let's pray.