

The Tear Collector

Songs of David: Volume 2, Part 3

Psalm 56

On July 17, 1999, thirty-eight-year-old John F. Kennedy Jr, the son of the thirty-fifth president of the United States make the headlines. However, it was not good news.

The night before he had piloted his single engine Piper Saratoga plane from New Jersey to an island just off the coast of Massachusetts called Martha's Vineyard. With him were his wife Carolyn and his sister-in-law Lauren.

Kennedy had logged 310 hours of flight time and had only completed half of an instrument training course. He was overconfident in his ability to fly at night – although he'd done it several times before.

However, on this particular night, there was no moon, and fog obscured the shore line of the island, blocking out the lights. The motion of a plane can fool the senses, especially when everything is completely dark around you; but the instrument panel is objective – they reveal that a plane is level, banking, climbing and descending. If a pilot trusts his instruments, he cannot go wrong. However, one author wrote, if he trusts himself, he can take his plane into what is called a graveyard spiral and crash.

From the investigation that would follow, radar showed the plane right on course, heading in for the airstrip. However, at just twenty miles out the plane began making turns away from the airstrip. It began spiraling down and within minutes, it crashed into the Atlantic Ocean, 16 miles away from Martha's Vineyard.

According to investigators, Kennedy had lost his sense of direction and equilibrium . . . he either ignored or misunderstood his instrument panel. His

plane was equipped with an autopilot that would have returned the plane to straight and level flight – if he had switched it on . . . evidently in the panic and confusion of those final moments he never did.¹

The Psalmist David is writing a poem about being surrounded by difficult and even life threatening circumstances.

Psalm 56 fact, the lights have effectively gone out . . . and he is flying in the dark.

His poem will be put to music, and it will become a classic – simply because every believer has experienced that same flight – more often than you can remember.

It will become part of the instrument panel that every believer can and should trust when flying in the dark trials of life.

So turn in your Bibles to Psalm 56.

You'll notice in very small print just above *verse 1* some explanation. That is called a subscription, and it reads, "***To the choir director.***"

Several hundred years before the birth of Christ, Jewish scholars wrote these notations that had come down through the centuries. It is not part of the original text, but it was used to help the student of scripture to understand the context of the Psalm and passed down for generations.

This particular Psalm is placed at the time – notice – ***when the Philistines seized David in Gath.***

You can read all about that dangerous and difficult event in ***1 Samuel 21.***

Let me at least give you a quick review.

David is alone – this event took place before he had gathered a personal entourage of friends and soldiers. He was running for his life from King

Saul, who wanted to kill this heir apparent to the throne of Israel.

There is little doubt that David was thinking that the last place on the planet King Saul would ever come looking for him – would be the hometown of a giant named Goliath . . . a giant that David had killed only a few years earlier.

To make it even more ironic – and dangerous for David – a few days before running to Gath, David had gone to the village of Nob where a priestly establishment was located.

David asked the priest if he had any weapons and the priest said, “The only weapon I have is the sword of Goliath.” It had evidently been given as an offering of praise to the power of God.

And the priest gives David the sword of Goliath.

So David arrives at the hometown of Goliath, carrying the murder weapon.

And you can imagine the Philistines immediately plan to kill him, and David ends up acting as if he’d lost his mind, and the king did not want anything to do with him, allowing David to escape.

One Old Testament scholar said that David’s flight to the city of Gath was proof of his despair (loss of equilibrium).ⁱⁱ

He was ignoring the instrument panel of God’s promise, spiraling . . . spiraling downward . . . heading for a crash.

However, God rescues David and in the process teaches him valuable lessons about faith . . . and fear.

So David writes a song about it.

And according to this subscription, the nation does not want to lose it; so give this song . . . notice the subscription . . . to the choirmaster!

We know from Biblical history that the choir master had special cupboards in the temple where articles and instruments and choral pieces were kept. Gary Hallquist had the key.ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, make sure this poem becomes one of a collection of poems to be put to music and kept safe.

The meaning of the next part of the subscription is unknown – some scholars believe David has assigned a certain meter and tempo; others believe it refers to some type of instrument.

But notice where it says, “A Mikhtam of David.”

That word mikhtam (nichtam) more than likely means “to engrave” or “to cut”.^{iv}

In other words, this is a Psalm that you want to engrave or cut into stone . . . you do not want to lose it.

And for many reasons – one of which is the obvious reason that this poem becomes the instrument panel for every believer from David’s generation to ours – this is how you fly level and straight when the darkness of fear demands nothing less than faith in the word of God.

Now, having spent all this time on the subscription before even getting to verse one, you are beginning to wonder how many weeks or years it will take us . . . I am going to cover just a few phrases only before heading to a different Psalm in our next session, the Lord willing.

David writes in *verse 1, Be gracious to me, O God, for man has trampled upon me; fighting all day long he oppresses me. Verse 2, My foes have trampled upon me all day long, for they are many who fight proudly against me.*

Now notice – **3. When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You.**

I love the realism of that admission.

In other words, I am outnumbered, and I am never going to make it out of here alive.

And I am afraid.

David is not going to be invited to very many testimony meetings talking like that. Shouldn’t he be saying, “Because I trust in You, I’ll never be afraid.” If you skip down to *verse 4b*, he adds, “***In God I have put my trust; I shall not be afraid.***”

He is clenching his teeth and saying, “I shall not . . . I will not be afraid.”

I am . . . but I am not going to be!

What David is effectively teaching us through his experience is that faith does not eliminate fear. In fact, faith is perhaps most clearly seen when you act in faith while in the midst of fearful circumstances.

Trust does not eliminate the trouble. Who among us trusts God more? The one who trusts Him when the sun is out . . . or the one who trusts Him when it is dark and the fog of circumstances hides our eyes from the shoreline of our destination?

I can remember when my children were little – they loved to climb 4 or 5 stairs and then get me to the bottom of the stairs to catch them when they jumped in the air toward me.

You could see their hesitation . . . fear on their faces . . . and then they would jump . . . their fear was overpowered by trust.

Every so often, just before they jumped but it was too late to stop, I'd turn as if I was going to walk away. Oh, the terror in their faces . . . at the last possible moment, I'd turn back and catch them . . . almost every time . . . they're fine . . . they're fine . . . years of counseling . . . they're just fine.

Faith does not mean the absence of fear.

Spurgeon writes, David was no braggart; he does not claim never to be afraid . . . evidently, it is possible for fear and faith to occupy the mind at the same time; but blessed is the fear that drives us to faith and trust.^v

David admits his fear . . . and he speaks further with realism . . . notice the last line of *verse 4. What can mere man do to me?*

Now you might think David wants us all to shout – they can do nothing to you, David . . . praise God!

Not quite . . . David goes on for two verses telling us what mere man can do to him – and to us.

Notice *verse 5. All the day long they distort my words.*

They misinterpret him . . . they twist his words.

Notice *verse 5b. All their thoughts are against me for evil* – in other words, they make it clear that they wish I were dead.

Look at *v. 6. They attack, they lurk* . . . in other words, they constantly intimidate me with their words – it is not physical attacks yet, but verbal attacks.

They misinterpret him . . . they malign him.

He writes, *they lurk, they watch my steps* – in other words, they dog my heels – the word for *lurk* can actually be translated they, “pant after” – like a dog on the hunt.^{vi}

David says I just can't seem to lose them!

It is time to check the instrument panel for directions . . . and guidance . . . and oversight.

David gives us what we can call three principles from the inspired instrument panel of God's word.

This becomes his source of hope, encouragement and direction and ours as well.

1. Principle #1: God's word is consistently appropriate for every trouble.

Notice how often David finds confidence in the word of God – *verse 4; In God, whose word I praise; look over at verse 10; In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise.*

And keep in mind all that David had at his disposal was his memory and the scripture that he

had memorized as a little boy from the Torah – the first five books of the Old Testament – possibly readings from Joshua and Judges . . . but that was it.^{vii}

When David talks about how God's word brings him to such delight and praise – keep in mind he does not have 66 Books of the Bible. He does not have a pocket edition of the New Testament or the Book of Psalms . . . he was writing them.

He is got Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy . . . the Books we can hardly make it through in our through the Bible reading.

However, those books were sufficient to bring David to understand the power and grace and justice and holiness and atonement and sacrifice and the faithful, covenant love of God for His people.

If David can find in those few books what he needed to trust in the providence and wisdom of God – we have all the more. And you've found it to be true . . . haven't you?

And when the lights have been turned out . . . when you are alone . . . when the pressure's unbearable or the pain is numbing – is there anything so constant and consistent and encouraging as this Word which is *sweeter than honey and the honeycomb? (Psalm 19:10).*

God's word is consistently applicable to every season and every situation in life.

So . . . Principle #1: God's word is consistently appropriate for every trouble.

2. Principle #2: God is consciously aware of every trail.

And I am specifically using the word trail instead of trial because that is exactly what David writes.

Notice the first phrase of *verse 8*. I love this statement – *You* (speaking of God) *You have taken account of my wanderings.*

The Hebrew word comes from a verb that refers to the wandering trail of someone experiencing rejection and deep grief.^{viii}

The last phrase of *verse 8* refers to *a book*, where God keeps it all written down. This is the kind of book you might call a diary or a journal.

This is deeply personal language that tells us without any question that God is not some distant sovereign who maps everything out and then expects you to stay on task . . . He keeps a close watch – a journal account, so to speak – of every step you take and even what you might describe as wandering.

David says – He tracks every step.

You might be aware of the syndicated comic panels called Family Circus. It is the most widely syndicated cartoon panel in the world – appearing for more than 60 years; it has been compiled into books, and they've sold more than 13 million copies.

I grew up reading the Family Circus – my mother bought nearly every one of Bill Kean's books; it probably encouraged her over the years to know that someone else described their family life as a circus.

Ours certainly was.

I especially like the cartoon panels where little Billy would be sent by his mother to pick up something from the corner market; he'd leave the house and then his trail – made up of dotted lines – would wind all around the neighborhood, up and down a tree, over a fence, petting a dog, kicking a cat – I made that up – running through the park; hopping on a swing; watching men working in the street . . . and the dotted lines would zigzag everywhere until he finally gets back home and tells his mother that he has completely forgotten where he was supposed to go.

And God knows everything about our wandering. He knows everything about our distractions; He knows everything about our weakness.

He knows us so well!

Let me ask you, what do you think God knows about you?

The truth is, He is infinitely aware of every dot in your dotted path – your wandering trail as you travel home.

He has not missed a step along the way.

God is consciously aware of your trail.

3. Principle #3: God's is compassionately attentive to every tear.

Notice verse 8 again – You have take account of my wanderings; Put my tears in Your bottle.

It was not until I traveled to Israel that I discovered the ancient practice of tear bottles. In the Latin language, they are called lachrymatories.

In the ancient days and even up to the times of the Roman empire, people kept delicate little containers to catch and store their tears.

In the Roman world, many of them were made out of glass. A friend of our family purchased this one and had it shipped to me – it is quite a treasure!

It's a simple vase like creation with an opening at the top of its long neck that someone placed at their cheeks to catch the falling tears.

It was normal at a funeral procession in Roman times for friends to bring along their lachrymatory and weep their tears, catching them in these miniature, delicate bottles and then place them at the graveside as a token of their sorrow.

It was common for wives of Roman soldiers to collect their tears and then give the brimming tear bottle to their husband upon his return as a token of their love and devotion.

In fact, we have uncovered accounts of marital unrest because the tear bottle was empty upon their return.

Tear bottles became companions to people in grief – they would take solace in the fact their tears were not lost.

However, here's the interesting point David is making; notice again; God is the one holding the bottle to your cheek, and God is the one collecting your tears.

He has a bottle just for your tears. In other words, what David means is this – God has not missed one tear you've ever shed.

Tears of sorrow . . . repentance . . . anguish . . . confusion . . . fear . . . hurt . . . rejection . . .

He is so deeply interested in your trouble and your trail and your tears that he is keeping all of them in mind.

By the way, one of the promises of heaven means more to me now – where we've been promised that ***God will wipe every tear from our eye (Revelation 21:4).***

Tears of sorrow and suffering and sadness and loss and pain . . . none of those anymore . . . lachrymatories will be things of the past.

And in the meantime – get this – David is not saying that this is your tear bottle you give to God – this is His bottle with your name on it; it is for Him . . . and the image here is one of God effectively stooping down from glory to collect them all.

Beloved, you never have, nor will you ever, cry alone.

And David is moved to praise God for this word.

David has shifted his focus from what people thing about him to what God thinks about him; he has shifted his perspective from what people are saying about him to what God has said to him.

No wonder he sings in *verse 10*, “*This I know – that God is for me*” – that is an incredible statement of faith when you are afraid.

This I know – God is for me – for my good – for my future – for my redemption – for my eternal fellowship with Him one day in glory (*verse 13*).

He is not against me . . .

God is for me . . . *verse 20, In God whose word I praise; In the Lord, whose word I praise.*

Notice again the refrain – *verse 11. In God I have put my trust, I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?*

However, notice now . . . no more list of things man can do to him.

Not now.

Because what man is doing to him is nothing in comparison with what God is doing with him and has planned for him.

This past week I prayed at the bedside of a man in our fellowship – I walked into his room, and he broke into a big smile; he’s now with the Lord; his widow smiling through it all by sheer trust and faith in Christ.

Fear? No Doubt . . . Faith? Absolutely.

I talked to a sweet couple in our church a couple of days ago who have been surprised beyond their wildest imagination. Eight weeks ago, not a care in the world beyond the hustle and bustle of their lives, their little boy, and their family circus.

Now, following a routine physical and a myriad of sudden tests, cancer has been discovered, and it has already invaded her bones.

Their trust in God’s grace an incredible testimony to me. The husband said to me, “Stephen, I’ve taken so many things from God for granted – just going through the motions . . . not anymore.”

These precious family members of ours are more in tune with the Spirit of God than every before . . . flying by the instrument panel of Psalm 56.

Encouraged beyond words that:

- **God’s word will be consistently appropriate to their trouble;**
- **That God is consciously aware of their trail;**
- **That God is compassionately attentive to their tears.**

The Enemy will say, God does not know about your problems – He has lost sight of your dotted line – it zigzagged a bit too much.

Oh no . . . He has not lost sight – He is recording your wandering trail in His journal.

The Enemy will say, “Alright, God knows, but He really doesn’t care . . . He has got way too many things going on in the universe to be concerned about you.”

Oh no . . . He is even now collecting every one of your tears. You’ve never cried, alone.

No matter what your senses might say – this is the instrument panel of Psalm 56.

God knows . . . and God cares.

William Frey was an undergraduate at the University of Colorado in 1951. He spent a couple of hours a week reading to a fellow student whose name was John. John was blind.

One day, William writes, I asked him how he lost his sight. He told me of an accident that happened when he was a teenager and how, at that point, he had simply given up on life. “When the accident happened and I knew that I would never see again, I felt that life had ended, as far as I was concerned. I was bitter and angry with God for letting this happen, and I took my anger out on everyone around me. I felt that since I had no future, I would not lift a finger on my behalf. Let others wait on me. I shut my bedroom door and refused to come out except for meals.”

William Frey writes, “the (young) man I knew was an eager college student, so I had to ask what had changed your attitude. He told me this story. “One day, my father came into my room and said he was tired of my feeling sorry for myself. He said that winter was coming, and it was always my job to put up the storm windows and that I was to get those windows up by suppertime tonight, or else! He slammed the door on the way out. “Well,” John said, “that made me so angry that I resolved to do it. Muttering to myself, I groped my way out to the garage, found the windows, a stepladder, all the necessary tools, and I went to work. They’ll be sorry when I fall off the ladder and break my neck, I thought; but little by little, groping my way around the house, I got the job done.”

Then he stopped, and his sightless eyes misted up as he told me, “I later discovered that at no time during that afternoon had my father ever been more than five feet from my side. I did not know it until later, but all the while I was climbing up and down that ladder, muttering to myself . . . fumbling with the tools and sweating my way through that horrendous project – in the dark – my father had been beside me all the way.”^{ix}

John Rippon would write it this way in his song of praise – echoing David’s song of faith and trust and with this I close:

*Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,
For I am thy God, I will still give thee aid;
I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,*

Upheld by my gracious omnipotent hand.

*The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, tho all hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never – no, never – no, never forsake.^x*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/4/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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- i Adapted from Michael Youseff, When the Crosses are Gone (Kobri, 2011), p. 19
ii Derek Kidner, quoted by James Montgomery Boice, Psalms: Volume 2 (Baker Books, 1996), p. 468
iii Adapted from G.A.F. Knight, Psalms: Volume 1 (Westminster Press, 1982), p. 262
iv John Phillips, Exploring the Psalms: Volume One (Loizeaux Brothers, 1988), p. 444
v Charles Haddon Spurgeon, The Treasury of David: Volume 1 (Zondervan, 1966), p. 465
vi Donald Williams, Mastering the Old Testament: Psalms 1-72 (Word Publishing, 1986), p. 389
vii James Montgomery Boice, Psalms: Volume 2 (Baker Books, 1996), p. 471
viii Williams, p. 391
ix Adapted from Charles Swindoll, Getting Through the Tough Stuff (W Publishing, 2004), p. 224
x John Rippon, How Firm a Foundation (The Worship Hymal, Lifeway, 2008), p. 456