

Reflections on Psalm 27

Introduction

Three months ago when the coronavirus pandemic first directly impacted New Mexico and our ability to meet together as a church, we turned to Psalm 46 as expression of our trust in the Lord “though the earth should change” (and it certainly has changed!). That was the last Sunday we gathered for corporate worship. As we plan toward meeting again for corporate worship next Sunday, albeit in a very limited fashion, this may possibly be our last Sunday of this form of family worship. As such, I would like us to end where we began...reflecting on another tremendous psalm of trust—Psalm 27. It is a psalm of David that begins with beautiful words of strong affirmation of the reality of God in one’s life, presents a strong desire to live in the presence of God, and points to the ongoing need for believers to continue to wait for the Lord. A very appropriate word for our times!

Read Psalm 27:1-14

Psalm 27 is a bit of a paradox. It almost feels like two separate psalms since the first part radiates such marvelous assurance (v.1-6) but the second part such urgent need (v.7-12). How can these both be part of a single psalm? We will return to this question toward the end. For now, let’s look at these two main movements of the psalm followed by a final word of instruction.

1. The enjoyment of absolute assurance in the face of all adversity (v.1-6)

In v. 1-3 David indicates how assurance begins—in who Yahweh is. He is the believer’s “light” (deliverance from darkness or evil) and “salvation.” These words form a wonderful hendiadys meaning “saving light.” With such a God as one’s “defense,” the believer truly has nothing to fear in all the universe! David’s use of the rhetorical question (“whom shall I fear?”) is a way of preaching to himself in the light of what he knows is true of his God. It is a resolute determination not to fear enemies because of the presence of God in his life. But such confidence is not merely doctrinal for David, for Yahweh has shown himself as salvation and defense in actual experience. David remembers past occasions when salivating enemies (he pictures them as ravenous beasts that would shred his flesh) were frustrated and crushed. And such deliverances give him confidence in the event that further adversity or assaults should come his way. David’s, and our, confidence is rooted in the reality that Yahweh is for us to save and protect...who or what shall we fear!?

David's assurance begins in knowing who Yahweh is, but it is intensified in the "presence" of Yahweh. In v. 4-6, David expresses his singular desire ("one thing") to live ever more closely to the divine presence. He has an insatiable desire for being in Yahweh's house in order to "behold the beauty of Yahweh." But what does this mean? How would David discover the Lord's beauty in the Lord's house (the tabernacle)? What did the tabernacle and its contents communicate to the worshipper? Dale Ralph Davis in his book on the Psalms suggests four things: (1) *The Lord's condescension*—the high and holy One stoops down and pitches his tent among His people; (2) *The Lord's revelation*—the ark of the covenant contained the two tablets of the Law and was a place of God's ongoing direction and revelation; (3) *The Lord's sustenance*—the table with the twelve fresh loaves of the bread of the Presence speaks of Yahweh as the sustainer of His people; (4) *The Lord's atonement*—God's provision and gift of the altar of sacrifice where guilt is paid for by the blood of a substitute.

For David, dwelling in the house of the Lord and meditating on His beauty intensified his sense of assurance in the day of trouble. The tabernacle is a place of shelter from his enemies, a secret place where no enemy could harm him. It speaks of the devoted protection that a guest would receive from his host, and here the host is Yahweh! Likely, the word for "shelter" is the word used for a lion's lair. Think of Yahweh as a lion and His servant being hidden away in His lair...how safe he is! Not only that, but Yahweh will place his servant high up on a rock, far out of the reach of those who want to harm him. All these images are meant to picture complete and total safety. David's firm assurance anticipates the celebrative praise offerings of the redeemed in this very tent. David cannot be silent; he must sing praise to Yahweh!

The principle seems to be that time spent in the Lord's presence, gazing on His beauty, contemplating all that He is to us is a way of reinforcing our assurance, making us ever more confident that we are safe in His hands

Questions for Reflection:

- What are you tempted to fear? How can Psalm 27 help you combat these fears?
- What "one thing" do you most ask from the Lord? Does it align with David's request?
- How do we behold the beauty of the Lord today? How do you meditate on it? What is the connection between meditating on the Lord's beauty and our assurance?
- How does Jesus fulfill the role of the tabernacle and become the focus of beholding the beauty of the Lord (cf. John 1:14-18)?

2. A strong prayer for God's continuing presence and David's continuing trust (v.7-14)

The calm assurance of the first half of the psalms gives way to an urgent plea for help and deliverance. This is another example of the "bold" praying of the psalmist from faith in who Yahweh is and what He has promised to be. David abruptly and somewhat parenthetically quotes Yahweh's command ("Seek My face"), and then indicates that that is exactly what he is doing (notice the repetition of God's "face" in v.8 and v.9). God's "face" is a powerful symbol of His presence. Yahweh had commanded David (and others; the command is plural) to seek Him, and David is simply being faithful to the Lord's command and invitation. The Lord's help in previous distresses gives David a ray of hope for the present one. Even if his father and mother forsake him (this is probably hypothetical or may be a poetic way of referring to their deaths), he knows Yahweh will gather him in. David also prays for the Lord's direction. He asks Yahweh to teach him His ways and lead him on a level path because of his enemies. The one who seeks God's face is also the one who walks in His ways. He wants to know the way the Lord intends him to take in order to come out of this trouble. He wants Yahweh to show him the pathway through the difficulties and threats he is facing. The prayer for a "level path" is not for ease but for sure progress when the merest slip would be exploited. His enemies are lurking, ready to bring him down by their lies and violence.

David's plea in trouble seems so incompatible with his calm assurance of v.1-6. But is it? Is this not part of the appeal of Psalm 27? Cannot multitudes of believer's testify what it is to move all too quickly from faith to fear, from trust to trouble, from resting in the Lord to pleading for rescue? David's faith is still robust; "the abiding faith of verse 1-6 has given way to the agitated faith of verses 7-12...the trauma of verses 7-12 doesn't falsify the faith of verse 1-6 but deepens it" (Davis).

The abiding reality of David's faith is seen in his final testimony and instruction (v.13-14). First his testimony: "I indeed believe that I will see the goodness of the Yahweh in the land of the living." He expects God's deliverance to come at some point in His life, though he does not know the timing. He has God's promise, and his hope in this promise is what sustains him in his present trouble. This leads him to his concluding word of instruction to all believers: "wait for Yahweh; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for Yahweh." To wait on God is to demonstrate confident expectation. In Hebrew it is a synonym for the word "hope"—not a wishful desire but a certain expectation of what will happen on the basis of God's promise and character. It is this certain hope that gives us courage in the midst of trials. To wait on the Lord implies a trust in Him alone for deliverance or salvation, though seldom is His timetable the same as ours (think how long David endured danger before becoming king!). His vindication of His people sometimes takes place in history, but rarely as soon as we want; nevertheless His ultimate vindication is priceless.

When the New Testament reader hears these words “I will see the goodness of Yahweh in the land of the living,” he or she rightly understands the fulfillment ultimately to be in the resurrection from the dead to “dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” The land where there is no death. It is for this that we wait with confident expectation. It is this hope that sustains in a myriad of trials, even death itself. God is worth waiting for!

Questions for Reflection:

- Do you ever “seek God’s face” with words or thoughts similar to David’s (*“Hear Yahweh and answer me,” “Do not hide your face,” “Do not abandon or forsake me”*)? Why might we be hesitant to use this language? Why was this not a lack of trust or irreverence on David’s part?
- What does it mean to “wait for the Lord?” How can we reconcile David’s desperate pleas to the Lord with his waiting on the Lord?
- Read Romans 8:18-25: How is this a fulfillment of Psalm 27? How does this help sustain you in the sufferings of this present time?

Pastor Mark