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Psalm 27

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# IN THE SECRET PLACE OF HIS TENT

We come together on the day after Christmas to worship God's greatest gift to us, his only begotten Son. Never has there been such a glorious, yet lowly birth. Deity allowed itself to be clothed not only in flesh but in shameful obscurity and homelessness as well. This birth captured all the senses and seized with indescribable awe the few who were privileged to see it. Angels sang, shepherds worshipped, and kings bowed down. Since that historic day, believers throughout the centuries have birthed an endless supply of carols and holy hymns resonating with praise for this One.

Yet as we gather here this morning, most of us look into each others' blurry eyes and wonder did we survive it all. Oftentimes a measure of emptiness follows Christmas. It can range from a profound sense of disappointment over unmet expectations, to a deep loneliness from fractured families, to a vague emptiness that comes from being overrun by activity or consumed with things. Even children in the healthiest of homes can find themselves let down after the barrage of presents. I have often thought that Satan's great strategy is imitation, followed by saturation.

On the first Sunday of Advent we examined the simplicity of what God requires of us and which stirs his heart the most: a song of praise. Today, the Sunday after Christmas, we will examine the gift that God longs to give us, one whose pleasure is indescribable and whose joy will never fade. The gift is something perhaps most of us never expect to receive in our lifetime, and it comes to us in the most unexpected ways. It is Immanuel ("God with us"), the gift of his person that is as present and intimate as the closest of friends.

In Psalm 27, David, Israel's sweet singer and poet-king memorialized his experience of this gift. The psalm revolves around the theme of God's presence and the impact it had on his soul. It has no historical notation, but it could well fit the context of David's early days when he was fleeing from Saul in the wilderness. Of the seventy-three psalms ascribed to David, this is my favorite, and it is my joy to share it with you during this holy season.

## I. God's Presence Gives Confidence for the Future (27:1-3)

### A Psalm of David<sup>1</sup>

**The LORD is my light and my salvation;  
Whom shall I fear?  
The LORD is the defense of my life;**

**Whom shall I dread?**

**When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh,  
My adversaries and my enemies, they stumbled and fell.  
Though a host encamp against me,  
My heart will not fear;  
Though war arise against me,  
In spite of this I shall be confident. (Ps 27:1-3 NASB)**

David opens his psalm with two bold statements (verses 1, 3) of his confidence that the past experience of God's deliverance (verse 2) protects him against every conceivable future threat. "Whom shall I fear?" and "whom shall I dread?" are not assertions of rash self-reliance, but statements of a man who had come close to death and was rescued by an unexpected invasion of God's saving hand. David gives few details of the actual event, but the metaphors are more than adequate to transport us to that dangerous moment when his enemies closed in upon him like ravenous beasts and almost ate him alive ("devour my flesh"). We can feel David's terror as the enemies approached in force. But then, to our amazement, "they stumbled and fell." The catastrophe was averted. In several of the psalms, "to 'stumble' is the prelude to disaster."<sup>2</sup>

From the time when David was anointed king by the prophet Samuel he had been on the run from Saul. Finding no safe place to settle he was forced to find his home hiding in caves at the edge of the wilderness. Driven to homelessness, with little evidence that he was God's anointed "son," his soul became disoriented. But at this moment, God's light of salvation broke in upon him and vanquished the dark shadows of death with such force that he never forgot who he was. He was now a confirmed "son" whose Father would never leave him and would forever mark out the "paths of righteousness." With God to guide and protect him his fears melted away.

David sees this act as the defining moment in his life, one that supremely characterizes God's everlasting commitment to him. So David uses this event as the foundation stone to build his confidence in the future. Even in the worst possible scenario, when he has to face the threat of a hostile army ("though a host encamp against me"), or even worse, an all-out military assault against him ("though war rise against me"), he believes that because of what God did in the past, his heart will not cave in to fear, nor will his faith waver (lit. "*even in this I am trusting*").

But as David continues, we learn that God surprises him with something far greater than guidance and protection.

## II. A Singular Passion for God's Presence (27:4-6)

One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek:  
 That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of  
 my life,  
 To behold the beauty of the LORD  
 And to meditate in His temple.  
 For in the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tab-  
 ernacle;  
 In the secret place of His tent He will hide me;  
 He will lift me up on a rock.  
 And now my head will be lifted up above my enemies  
 around me,  
 And I will offer in His tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;  
 I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the LORD. (27:4-6)

David discovers there is something much sweeter in victory than deliverance from his enemies. Out in the wilderness, with no home, he finds refuge in God. It was as if in response to his request, God lifted him to his sanctuary on the holy hill. Once there, he became his host, and not only welcomed him, but also invited him into the innermost recesses of his heavenly tabernacle, as if David were a privileged priest.

Once David is securely hidden, he finds he is so overwhelmed with God's very person that his fears melt away. As John would later write, "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). David's heart is being inundated with a beauty that seizes all his senses. This is not an abstract beauty, like that of a great painting, but the beauty of a Person in motion, like Mikhail Baryshnikov in his greatest ballet performance. God's gracious hospitality captures David's emotions with an indescribable awe. In fleeing to God he hasn't merely found a firm footing and protective covering, but an exaltation that lifts him so far above his enemies that all he can do is shout with joy and sing his praises.

David is learning one of the most important lessons about spirituality. The sacred space of God's tabernacle is not confined to one geographical spot, but is extremely mobile. Early in his flight from Saul, David had sought help from Ahimelech, the priest at the sanctuary at Nob (1 Sam 21). But he did not find it a safe refuge. Later, when his visit was reported to Saul, the king had all of Ahimelech's sons executed. But now David has discovered that the wilderness with its rocky crags has served as a more protective sanctuary than the tabernacle in Nob, and that his enemies have strangely performed better as priests than Ahimelech's sons, granting him a greater intimacy with God than he has ever experienced. To quote the familiar phrase, "It doesn't get any better than this!" God's holy love for David swallowed up all other loves. For David, the sweetness of that moment was so powerful that experiencing the presence of God became his life's "one" obsession ("one thing I have asked...to dwell... behold...meditate" ['to inquire']).

Experiencing this "sacred mobility" of the sanctuary was probably just as surprising to the apostles in their day. How

amazed they must have been to witness everything that was supposed to be happening around the temple in Jerusalem—healing, hospitality, feasting, forgiveness, teaching, and cleansing—occurring around the itinerant rabbi in Galilee. Just think how many times Jesus welcomed people into the most intimate of settings and cared for their every need with an abundance of food, healing and deliverance. Reflecting on the ministry of Jesus, John opens his letter with these words that sum up the theology of this mobile sanctuary:

**And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, (lit. "tabernacled among us") and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)**

In the summer of 1989, I began to understand the substance of David's "one thing." We were in Romania, sitting on a picturesque hillside dotted with haystacks, near the small village of Costesti. Ceausescu's dreaded secret police (the *Securitate*) discovered our location and sent a small band of agents to spy out our activities, hoping to arrest our friends whose contact with us as foreigners was illegal, not to mention our "religious" teaching. In response to the threat, I was assigned to stand watch on the hillside overlooking the road, while other members of the team continued to teach, hidden from public view inside a large tent. As I stood watch, meditating on this psalm, David's story seemed mysteriously re-enacted before my eyes. The evil man came several times, but stumbled and fell, while God hid us in his tent with songs of joy. The presence of God and the love experienced inside that tent are indescribable.

Some who are concerned with the current "consumer" mentality of worship would contend that we shouldn't come to worship God with the expectation of "getting something out of it." Their concern is a good one, but worship is a two-way street: we come to experience God's person and give back his love in return. C. S. Lewis suggests, "It is in the process of being worshiped that God communicates His presence...for many people at many times the 'fair beauty of the Lord' is revealed chiefly or only while they worship Him together. Even in Judaism the essence of the sacrifice was not really that men gave bulls and goats to God, but that by their so doing God gave Himself to men."<sup>3</sup>

Since my time in that humble tent 15 years ago I have found my experience of God's presence occurring in the most unexpected places, turning ordinary space into holy ground and transposing time into moments pregnant with eternity. Hospitals are the most common of these places. I have had many sacred memories at Good Samaritan, El Camino, Stanford and O'Connor hospitals. The dark enemy of death has a way of driving families deep into the recesses of God's tent to experience his presence and love in ways that transcend all ordinary forms of worship. Two weeks ago, Gary Vanderet and I were present when the doctor of one of our members transformed her room in the ICU into a sanctuary. Death was imminent, and the family was faced with the difficult decision of when

to “let go” and turn off the machines that were keeping their mother alive. As Gary and I watched this woman doctor speak, pray, counsel, and even weep with her patient and family, we felt like we were beholding the Spirit of Jesus in the room and felt unworthy to stand on holy ground. George Herbert’s poem “Love” captures the scene well:

Love<sup>4</sup>

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,  
 Guilty of dust and sin.  
 But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack  
 From my first entrance in,  
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
 If I lack’d anything.  
 “A guest,” I answer’d, “worthy to be here”;  
 Love said, “You shall be he.”  
 “I, the unkind, the ungrateful? ah my dear,  
 I cannot look on thee.”  
 Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
 “Who made the eyes but I?”  
 “Truth, Lord, but I have marr’d them; let my shame  
 Go where it doth deserve.”  
 “And know you not,” says Love, “who bore the blame?”  
 “My dear, then I will serve.”  
 “You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste my meat.”  
 So I did sit and eat.

God’s presence gave David confidence not only to face the future, it also became the one driving passion that swallowed up the rest. Most of us are familiar with these first two stanzas of the poem, but we seldom examine the third and fourth stanzas, which describe David’s state when he penned it.

### III. The Memory of God’s Presence Gives Hope In Pain (27:7-12)

**Hear, O LORD, when I cry with my voice,  
 And be gracious to me and answer me.  
 [My heart says of you, “Seek his face!  
 Your face, Lord, I will seek. NIV]  
 Do not hide Your face from me,  
 Do not turn Your servant away in anger;  
 You have been my help;  
 Do not abandon me nor forsake me,  
 O God of my salvation!  
 For my father and my mother have forsaken me,  
 But the LORD will take me up. (27:7-10)**

Now we discover that David’s present state is anything but confident. God does not appear present and intimate, but distant and hidden. The fact that David mentions the term “anger” may suggest that he is aware that his sin may have caused an irreparable rift in his relationship with God. He is not sure he has the right to presume on God’s presence. If God answers his prayer it will be a sheer gift of grace. David’s lifelong passion to seek God’s presence has also wilted, and it

takes a sheer act of his will to redirect his soul from despair to “seek his face.”

But like a drill sergeant shouting his wake-up call to sleeping recruits at 4 a.m., David enlists his soul, and through the metaphors of memory revitalizes it with hope. Sometimes all we have to worship is memory, but memory can be a vital tool to stabilize us in the storms and ignite lost hope. As part of the description of his travail, David laments, “My father and mother abandoned me.” Some scholars take this phrase to mean that his parents “have left me when they died.” If that is the case, David may have lost the last remnant of family support, forcing his trust in the Lord to deeper levels. Because of his memory of the presence of God he can still pray with confidence that he will not be totally abandoned, for he knows that the Lord will “take him up” (the Hebrew verb bears the nuance of “to take up, care for, provide protection”).

David writes two more petitions that further describe the painful situation he finds himself in.

**Teach me Your way, O LORD,  
 And lead me in a level path  
 Because of my foes.  
 Do not deliver me over to the desire of my adversaries,  
 For false witnesses have risen against me,  
 And such as breathe out violence. (27:11-12)**

Earlier, David had been physically attacked and his enemy stumbled and fell. Now he is verbally attacked. Those who have suffered under the pain of cutting words know that can be more brutal than an actual sword. Yet we should not underestimate the gift of memory and how it can both redirect a soul lost in shame and ignite hope and renew passion. Several years ago I was in a dark place, wondering if my own sins and the hurts I had caused others had placed a rift between God and me. I wondered if I would ever know real joy again, if I would ever truly laugh and dance again. In my morning devotional time I returned to my favorite psalm and wrote these words:

Psalm 27: “One thing”

What happened that day so long ago?  
 What occurred in that frail tent dense with bodies  
 that it became a holy temple  
 and we found ourselves safely secure beneath  
 the shadow of your wings?  
 Did the enemy force us into the wind of your Spirit,  
 that we embraced in such love?  
 Did the enemy know his malicious vice  
 became the winepress of Golgotha,  
 or that he made us see your face  
 in one another’s tears?  
 What happened that day so long ago?  
 All I know is that I want to go back,  
 take me back, O Lord!

Concluding, David adds two final verses, words which I think he may have written when the poem was placed in Is-

rael's hymnal to instruct the congregation how to sustain the presence of God in difficult times.

#### IV. Teaching Confidence In God's Presence (27:13-14)

**I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would  
see the goodness of the LORD  
In the land of the living.  
Wait for the LORD;  
Be strong and let your heart take courage;  
Yes, wait for the LORD. (27:13-14)**

Now the poet becomes a teacher who leaves Israel with two final lessons regarding the presence of God. First, during David's darkest times it was his memory of God's presence that sustained him with hope of the future. God's gifts are not deceptive. The tastes of his goodness in the past are to spur us on to the greater glory of the future. The purpose of memory is not to deny the present by escaping to the nostalgic past, but to embrace and endure present sufferings, being strengthened and nurtured with hope for the future. Secondly, David gives a stern warning: "Wait for the Lord. Yes, wait for the Lord." This is a clear statement that we cannot manipulate the presence of God. He comes in his own time and pleasure, so we must learn to wait. Yet we wait in eager anticipation, for his coming is as sure as the dawn.

1. I have used Fokkelman's poetic divisions of the psalm. J. P. Fokkeman, *The Psalms In Form, The Hebrew Psalter in its Poetic Shape* (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2002), 38.

2. See also Pss 9:3; 37:24; 119:165; Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms* (NIVAC. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 1:483.

3. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1976), 93.

4. George Herbert, *The Complete English Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 178.

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