

# Anthem Against Anxiety

## PSALM 56

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Four Lakes Church of Christ  
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It is good to be together this morning! We will be partaking of the Lord's Supper right after our study today, so if you still need to get the elements for the Supper, those are available right inside the front door. After partaking of the Lord's Supper, Caleb/Jim will be leading us in several songs before we dismiss [for class].

As our custom has been, we are starting with God's plan of salvation this morning. To be clear, we sinned, but God sent his only Son to save us. He died on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. We respond to that good news by believing it, by turning away from sin, by publicly confessing Jesus as the Christ, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with him in baptism, an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins.

And we do have several examples this morning, starting with some good news from the Lord's church in Buford, Georgia. They posted a few days ago, starting with a quote from Luke 15:10, ***"Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*** They go on to say, "On Tuesday afternoon, Yaa Peasah was baptized into Christ for the remission of her sins! Let us join the angels in rejoicing over this precious soul who has dedicated her life to her Lord. Our God continues to bring MORE bountiful fruit! Thank you, Lord!" So, we are thankful for Yaa's decision this week.

And then we also have some good news from the Philippines, from a gospel preacher by the name of Jun Uclaray Miranda. He posted several pictures with a report from December 9, "Gospel preaching today at Barangay Mapurao Allacapan Cagayan." He gives the names of those involved and then says that thirteen souls were baptized and that this is now the newly-established congregation at Mapurao Cagayan." Beyond this, brother Jun also posted some pictures of their church facility over there, something I would probably describe as something of a hut or a shelter. It looks like some kind of a tarp stretched over some poles. And then I noticed that they are using PowerPoint with a projector! So, it's raining, and then I noticed that they have the projector and laptop plugged into a power strip, plugged into an extension cord of some kind, with an extra umbrella directly over the projector, with this setup projecting onto a sheet. And that made me especially thankful for the facility we have here in Madison. What a blessing! But, we are thankful for the thirteen souls who obeyed the gospel in the Philippines a week or two ago. And we share all of this by way of encouragement: If you have any interest at all in following their example, we would love to study with you today. Pull me aside after worship, and we would be more than happy to help in any way we can.

This morning, I would invite you to turn with me to Psalm 56, a Psalm that has been described online (by Christopher Rich) as an “Anthem Against Anxiety.” The word “anxiety” is not used in the Psalm itself, but it seems quite appropriate. I did a bit of reading on anxiety this week, and probably the most basic definition comes from the dictionary, where anxiety is described as “fear or nervousness about what might happen.” We could obviously dig quite a bit deeper than this, but this seems like a pretty good summary.

And when we think of anxiety as “fear or nervousness about what might happen,” I think we realize that this a real challenge for most of us. Most of us do experience some level of fear or nervousness concerning what might happen. Especially these days, we may be somewhat nervous about our health. We might be somewhat concerned about our finances. We might be a bit afraid about crime in the neighborhood. We might be somewhat nervous about a political situation. We might be afraid or nervous about any number of things: a relationship, a work scenario, a family concern. The possibilities are endless.

If you have made it to Psalm 56 by now, before we get to the text itself, I would invite you to look at the heading. The headings are not inspired, but they are very, very old, added by scribes in ancient times as the Psalms were being assembled. Some of the Psalms are completely anonymous, but with others we have some background. And this is the case with Psalm 56. In my copy of the Bible, the heading says, ***“For the choir director; according to Jonath elem rehokim. A Mikhtam of David, when the Philistines seized him in Gath.”*** The fact that this is ***“for the choir director”*** indicates that this Psalm was intended to be used in public worship. The next little phrase is difficult. Some translate this as ***“Silent Dove in a Distant Land.”*** And there are variations of this. Some see it as a description of what’s going on in the Psalm, but most see it as something of a musical note, “Sing this song to the tune of, ‘Silent Dove in a Distant Land.’” It would be like us teaching somebody a new song and saying, “Sing this to the tune of ‘Row, Row, Row Your Boat.’” We are assigning new words to tune that we know. Maybe you have sung Amazing Grace to the tune of Gilligan’s Island.

But the last part of the heading is what really helps us understand what’s going on here, ***“A Mikhtam of David, when the Philistines seized him in Gath.”*** We really don’t know what a ***“mikhtam”*** is. It is a Hebrew word perhaps meaning “golden,” perhaps referring to something that is “engraved,” the idea that this Psalm is especially worthy of preserving, the ancient way of saying that an album has “gone platinum.” Or it may be some kind of musical notation. The key here is the context. This Psalm is by David, ***“when the Philistines seized him in Gath.”*** This allows us to tie this Psalm to an actual event in David’s life. We’ve been studying David in our Sunday morning class, and this event goes back to the time when David is on the run from King Saul. David has been anointed as the future king of Israel, but Saul is still the current king, and Saul is getting jealous. Saul, then, is chasing David all over Israel, and as he is on the run, David stops by to meet with a priest in Nob (this is where he eats the consecrated bread), he asks for a weapon, and this is where we learn that the priest of Nob just so happens to have Goliath’s sword safely tucked away. David, then, takes Goliath’s sword and (in 1 Samuel 21) heads for Gath, in the land of the Philistines, which happens to be Goliath’s hometown. Surely, nobody will think to look for me here! Unfortunately for David, though, the king of Gath is not impressed. They recognize him right away, and David finds himself in trouble once again. We have a saying, “Out of the frying pan, into the fire.” David is on the run from King Saul and flees into the hands of Achish, the king of Gath. I think of maybe taking a drug prescribed for some life-threatening condition, and when we read the fine print, we learn that one of the side-effects is death! David is out of options here. And facing this new and improved way to die at the hands of the Philistines, future King David pretends to be crazy. We certainly don’t want to insult those with mental illness here, but David (in verse 13) ***“disguised his sanity before them, and acted insanely in their hands, and scribbled on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva run down into his beard.”*** This, by the way, is one of

many references to beards in the Bible. I'd like to think his beard played some role in saving his life here! And if I could paraphrase King Achish in this situation, he basically says (in verse 15), "Don't I have enough crazy people around me already? Get this man out of here!" And David is able to run, once again, back into Israel, to the cave of Adullam.

So, this is the context. David is on the run, jumping from the frying pan into the fire and right back into the frying pan. And he is somewhat afraid. He is certainly experiencing some sense of "fear or nervousness about what might happen." I share this so we have the background. David has some issues, doesn't he? We think we have some reasons to experience fear or nervousness about what might happen (and we might), but David is on the run for his life. And as he is in Gath, fearing the king, like Paul and Silas in prison, he sings; he writes Psalm 56.

Imprisoned in Gath, with spit running down his beard, King David composes a song.

- <sup>1</sup> *Be gracious to me, O God, for man has trampled upon me;  
Fighting all day long he oppresses me.*
- <sup>2</sup> *My foes have trampled upon me all day long,  
For they are many who fight proudly against me.*
- <sup>3</sup> *When I am afraid,  
I will put my trust in You.*
- <sup>4</sup> *In God, whose word I praise,  
In God I have put my trust;  
I shall not be afraid.  
What can mere man do to me?*
- <sup>5</sup> *All day long they distort my words;  
All their thoughts are against me for evil.*
- <sup>6</sup> *They attack, they lurk,  
They watch my steps,  
As they have waited to take my life.*
- <sup>7</sup> *Because of wickedness, cast them forth,  
In anger put down the peoples, O God!*
- <sup>8</sup> *You have taken account of my wanderings;  
Put my tears in Your bottle.  
Are they not in Your book?*
- <sup>9</sup> *Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call;  
This I know, that God is for me.*
- <sup>10</sup> *In God, whose word I praise,  
In the LORD, whose word I praise,*
- <sup>11</sup> *In God I have put my trust, I shall not be afraid.  
What can man do to me?*
- <sup>12</sup> *Your vows are binding upon me, O God;  
I will render thank offerings to You.*
- <sup>13</sup> *For You have delivered my soul from death,  
Indeed my feet from stumbling,  
So that I may walk before God  
In the light of the living.*

As we think about what David writes here, I'd like to take the next few moments to apply this inspired Psalm to our situation today. As we experience fear or nervousness about what might happen next in our lives, what do we learn from King David? What does God want us to get out of this song nearly 3000 years after it was first written?

I. **And it seems one of the first lessons we learn here comes in the fact that in this desperate situation, King David starts by CALLING OUT TO GOD FOR HELP.**

In verse 1, ***"Be gracious to me, O God, for man has trampled upon me."*** And in verse 3, ***"When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You."*** David, then, doesn't just power through it, he doesn't just pretend he is not afraid, but he takes his fear to God. He takes his fear to someone who can actually do something about it. He confesses that he is afraid. And this is where we have the reminder that it is not a sin to be somewhat nervous or concerned about what might happen to us. Some level of fear or anxiety causes us to walk a bit faster through the crosswalk when we see the car coming. Some level of fear causes us to pretend to be insane in the king's presence. But when we are truly afraid, we confess that fear to God. We take that to the Lord. Peter refers to casting our anxiety on the Lord, because he cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). We dump that fear on him. We don't ignore it, we don't pretend we are not afraid, we don't bury it, but we pour it out on Him. And remember: This is coming from a young man who has killed lions and bears; this is coming from the young man who has killed Goliath. David is no coward, but he does call out to God for help.

And he can do this, because he has faith in the word of God. In verse 4, he says, ***"In God, whose word I praise, in God I have put my trust; I shall not be afraid."*** As I understand it, the word of God in this passage is God's promise that David would be the next king of Israel. If God has said this, there is no way that David will die in Gath! I can't be king if I'm dead; therefore, I really do have nothing to truly fear. Based on the word of God, I will make it out of this situation. He knows this.

He continues by asking (at the end of verse 4), ***"What can mere man do to me?"*** Obviously, a lot! It is a rhetorical question, but David does give us some of the highlights, doesn't he? He doesn't downplay what he's going through, he doesn't dismiss this as being nothing, but he gives us something of an outline. So, scattered throughout this passage, we have a list of what is actually happening. In verses 1-2, he's getting ***"trampled."*** They are also ***"fighting"*** against him and ***"oppressing"*** him. In verse 5, they ***"distort his words."*** Their ***"thoughts are against him for evil."*** In verse 6, they ***"attack,"*** they ***"lurk,"*** they ***"watch his steps,"*** they ***"lie in wait to take his life."*** These are some serious issues!

On top of this, I would also point out that the attacks keep coming. Three times in this first paragraph, David refers to these things as happening ***"all day long."*** And doesn't that add to our anxiety? It's one thing to face one event, one episode, that causes us to fear, but it's so much worse when it keeps coming – for days, weeks, months, or even years at a time. And that's the situation David is in here. On top of being on the run from King Saul, David is now in Gath, surrounded by his enemies. He has killed their hero (Goliath), and now, he is in their custody, and we can only imagine what they are doing here. David's stress, then, doesn't let up, and in the middle of all of this, David calls out to God for help. In fact, he writes this song!

And this seems to be one lesson we can learn this morning: When we face fear over what might happen to us, a good first step is to call out to God for help, dumping all of it on the Lord. We pray. We sing. We tell the Lord about it, and we praise him in the process. We don't deny what we are going through, but we confess it, we explain it, we open our hearts to the Lord, a cry for help.

## II. As we get back to the text itself, we come to verse 8 and we have the reminder that GOD CARES.

We have the reminder that God knows, he understands, he pays attention. ***“You have taken account of my wanderings,”*** David says, [You have] ***“...put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your book?”*** Let’s understand at the beginning of this that when we are anxious and afraid, we do have the tendency to cry. My first memory of being with someone who wouldn’t stop crying was my preschool graduation ceremony down at the Getwell Church of Christ in Memphis, Tennessee. We lived there for a year as my dad worked on his second master’s degree. While he went to school, I also went to school. I was four. I learned how to write my name. I also learned how to finger paint. It was a great year. But when it came time for the graduation ceremony, we all had caps and gowns, and as this huge class of 4-year-olds moved from one building to another, the girl right next to me tripped and fell and skinned her knee. It was awful, she cried the whole time, we felt terrible. Her tears were in response to her pain. She was having a bit of anxiety. And most of us do the same thing. We get anxious, and we cry.

Well, in this passage, David pictures this for us. Singing to God he says, ***“You have taken account of my wanderings,”*** (you see where I am, and where I’ve been, and what’s happening to me), and you have ***“put my tears in your bottle.”*** It’s an interesting picture, isn’t it? In my mind, I picture God with a little vial, and he is scooping up, preserving, every tear. We can only imagine the effort involved in collecting a tear in a bottle. What if the doctor wanted us to bring in a tear sample? I think I’d have a hard time doing that. But it’s almost like God is building a collection. We collect things that are important to us. Kids collect bugs and rocks. Adults collect antiques or books. I have a thing for flashlights. But in this passage, we find that God collects our tears! Some of the commentaries referred to the practice of ancient mourners collecting their tears in vials, to be placed in the tomb of the one who died, as proof of their love. Maybe that’s the picture here; maybe not. But the point is: Our tears are important to God. When we cry, he notices. God cares.

Not only this, but with reference to his tears, he also asks of God, ***“Are they not in Your book?”*** In my mind, this sounds like something of a ledger, almost like an accounting spreadsheet, or maybe the official court record. We think of the official record in the book of Esther, where the king is reading late at night and reads about Mordecai, almost like minutes to a meeting. Well, perhaps in some similar way, God collects and records our tears. He keeps track of these things, because he cares. Our tears are of great value; never wasted, never unnoticed, never ignored. If he knows the number of hairs on my head, and if he knows when a single sparrow falls to the ground, then he also cares for each of us here this morning, ***“So do not fear,”*** Jesus says, ***“[for] you are more valuable than many sparrows”*** (Matthew 10:29-30).

And this is true whether we are caught in enemy territory holding the sword we used to chop off the head of their champion, or whether we are enduring crippling back pain due to an injury, or facing loneliness at the loss of a spouse, or facing unfair criticism at work, or whatever it is. God cares. The world around us may pass us by without noticing, our own Christian family might drop the ball from time to time, but God always cares. And even if nobody on this earth knows what we are going through, he knows and he cares. He collects our tears in his bottle, and he records those tears in his book.

## III. As we come to the last little section in this Psalm, David realizes here at the end that GOD IS FOR ME.

In verse 9, ***“Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call; This I know, that God is for me.”*** This is personal! He goes on to praise the word of God again (twice, in verse 10), and then he says (starting in the

middle of verse 11), ***“I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?”*** We certainly think of what Paul will go on to write in Romans 8:31, when he says, ***“If God is for us, who is against us?”*** As parents, we always have a tendency to be ***“for”*** our children, don’t we? Sometimes, that might get us in trouble, but we tend to take our kids’ side in things. Maybe in a slightly similar way, God is ***“for us.”*** He assumes the best of us. He listens to us. And we know this because he tells us so in his word. This isn’t just a hope or a dream, but God’s presence with us has been promised in his word. Fear is real. Anxiety is real. But so is God. Our problems may be big, but so is God, and his word explains that he is ***“for us.”***

In verse 12, David responds with obedience. He acknowledges his own responsibility here – to fulfill his vows, to offer sacrifices. And at the end (in verse 13), he realizes that God has saved him. David has been in danger, he is still in danger in Gath, and he will still be in danger when he gets back to Israel, but God has, does, and will protect him through all of it. And David acts on the fact that he will survive this, even though it doesn’t seem like it at the time. There’s not some magical “poof” that immediately makes everything okay, but David knows that God is for him. And this that is truly what happens. Over the next few chapters in 1 Samuel, Saul will take his own life, David will assume his role as king, and he will go on to defeat the Philistines in battle, permanently, and they are never heard from again in world history.

### **Conclusion:**

Here at the end, we have the big picture. As David jumps from the frying pan into the fire, from Israel to Gath, and back again, he is somewhat anxious – he has this fear or nervousness about what might happen. But instead of panicking, instead of getting overwhelmed, instead of being completely paralyzed with fear, King David calls out to God for help, he knows that God cares, and he reminds himself that God is for him personally. And as a result, the lesson for us is: Like David, our hope is in God; our hope does not depend on what is going on around us. Our hope does not depend on a cure. Our hope does not depend on a million dollars being deposited in our account tomorrow morning. Our hope does not depend on making it home safely today. But our hope is in God. And that allows us to praise God. This world is not safe; in fact, it’s fairly safe to say that none of us will make it out of this world alive. So, in this life, we will be nervous and afraid from time to time. But through it, we are able to sing to God, as David does (in verse 3), ***“When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You.”*** And this brings us to the end of our study on this ***“Anthem Against Anxiety.”***

Before we partake of the Lord’s Supper together, let’s close this study with a prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the great and awesome God, the God of King David. This morning, we have just barely scratched the surface concerning how much you really care for us. If we truly understood how much you love us and care for us, we would never fear anything again. And so, today, we are thankful for your word and for the comfort it brings. We pray for deeper faith and greater trust.

We come to you as we always do, in the name of your Son Jesus. Lord, come quickly. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)