

Burden Bearing

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Text: Psalm 55

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If we, by chance, could have Aladdin's Lamp, and were offered one wish (our's is a cheap Genie), what might we wish for? In these coronavirus days I suspect we would have a pretty common answer: that the pandemic would end world wide. But our answers might be articulated in more specific ways, focusing on something quite specific. But whatever it is we might wish for, we would probably all be seeking some form of the same thing: a lessened burden, more peace of mind, greater security. In different ways, every one of us experiences things in our lives that makes us feel insecure.

Insecurities can represent some of the big questions in our lives. Will my job in the oil patch survive the low oil prices? Have I really prepared myself enough for retirement? How is my health? But also small questions in our lives. Years ago the gas gauge on our old minivan failed. It always showed "empty" even with a full tank. Despite my attempts to guesstimate my fuel use, every time I got in the van I wondered whether I would get to my destination. In these coronavirus days, we can wonder about even small things. We can wonder, "did I just touch my face?" Who would have thought 2 months ago that I would be suddenly concerned about touching my face in the supermarket!

Insecurity. Psalm 55 speaks about such an experience with one man, and how he thought about responding to it. The author, by tradition, is thought to be David, and in this psalm he seems to be at wit's end. His world was caving in on him, and he had no recourse but to pray to his God, asking God to give ear to his cry and consider his plight. In reading these words it seems like David's rule was under a great deal of pressure, that the society of Jerusalem was coming apart at the seams. He wrote that he had many enemies, who spoke against him and caused troubles. And they seemed to be stirring up the whole of the city, bringing to it violence and strife and mischief. The merchants of the marketplace were deceiving their buyers, You can't trust them. The course of justice was corrupted. Couldn't trust that either. And the sense is that there's no end in sight, for we read in verse 10, "Day and night they go around upon their walls". Here, in this allusion, David drew a parallel between his enemies and the watchmen who guard the city: both ever present, both ever at work. But any enemy, no matter who it might be, always causes you to be looking over your shoulder. Enemies make you feel insecure. David summed up his reaction with the following words: "anguish", "terror", "fear", "trembling", "horror". His anxiety, his insecurity, left him moaning before God in prayer. But it was even worse than this. The surprise for David was that this "enemy" turned out to be his "familiar friend". Now wouldn't that make you feel insecure – discovering that your friends were turning against you.

It doesn't take much to leave one feeling insecure. We were in a dollar store in a mall with Paul and Danny once when they were very young. They had never been there before, and there was a small crowd of strangers around them. But they contentedly scanned the racks of toys and

goodies looking for something of interest. Secure... until they noticed they couldn't see their parents! In that moment, that once comfortable situation instantly changed into a scary one for them. It doesn't take much, does it, to prompt insecurity.

In times of worry, humans have a reaction we call "flight or fight". We find in this psalm that this is David's reaction as well. First came flight. He wrote, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest". Escape. How often do we feel the same way when we are weighted down by the pressures of life — how often have we said to ourselves, "Ah, if only I could get away from it all!"

Isolation today is a form of "flight", isn't it? Staying at home is a way of fleeing the virus. But here is the irony: now after a month or more of isolation our sense of "cabin fever" can be lively enough that we want breaks from the isolation. In other words, many of us want to escape our flight from the virus! Certainly escape from what worries us in order to maintain our health and mental well-being is a good thing. We need the break from the worries of work and school that long weekends and summer vacations offer us. We need the relaxation a good book provides. But at times we are tempted to fall prey to the kinds of escapism which does us no good at all. Procrastination is one which we all know well. Here's another: apparently the average Albertan spends over \$800 per year on some form of gambling, in the hope of hitting it big and getting ahead. Some try to avoid what makes them feel insecure by focusing in on something else — like being a workaholic so you don't have to think about home life. There is the destructive escapism of alcohol and drug abuse to dull the pain of what eats at you. At its most basic, psychologists tell us that the primary response to feeling insecure is social withdrawal. Flight. And that is worrisome, for social withdrawal is—ultimately—now a helpful response to our worries. And yet here we find ourselves being told to withdraw from social contact to protect ourselves from the virus we are worried about. So while isolation may protect our physical health it potentially can erode our mental wellbeing.

Escapism as a way of dealing with our worries frequently does not do what we hope it will do. There was a young Vancouver Island family who in the 1970's grew increasingly anxious about the possibility of nuclear war. This is a true story. Their insecurity grew and grew, until they felt the need to "get away from it all", to find a place where war could never, ever touch them. They hunted through books and surveyed maps in an attempt to find the one corner of the globe most likely to remain unaffected by war. Finally, they found the perfect, safe spot, packed their things and moved to the place on earth least likely to see warfare.... the Falkland Islands! Escapism doesn't always bring the tranquility we desire.

David also considered the second option of the "flight or fight" reaction: FIGHT! If he couldn't lose his troubles by fleeing from them, then maybe he could put them away by attacking his enemies. And so he cried out to God, "confuse the tongues of those who speak against me... send them down to Sheol (hell) alive to suffer there in torment... kill them that they might no longer trouble me!" Do we fight back in response to feeling insecure? At times I think many of us have. Certainly our governments are approaching the pandemic as the fight of their lives. Donald Trump has adopted the image of being a "wartime president." But even in smaller ways

many people have been responding to the pandemic in a “fight” response. The so-called pandemic snitch lines have been very popular, reporting on people who seem to be willfully defying the isolation guidelines. A “fight” response. And then there are those who have had enough with the isolation, so we see growing incidences of people protesting the guidelines.

In Psalm 55 King David explored his fight or flight options for dealing with his challenge. But then he explored a third option, the one that he eventually chose. We read starting in verse 16, “As for me, I shall call upon God, and the Lord *will* save me. Evening and morning and afternoon I will complain and murmur, and he *will* hear my voice. he *will* redeem my soul in peace from the battle which is against me”. Notice the confidence of the language: God *will... will... will...* Flight means insecurity will still be lurking somewhere. Fight can create more damage and more insecurity. Turning to God can mean finding security in an insecure world.

What is insecurity? Among other things it is the feeling that “I can’t do this on my own”. It is the sense that “my situation is isolating me”. It’s the unsettled feeling that comes when the things you trust have somehow become no longer trustworthy. It’s when things you’ve taken for granted change. The feelings come when we experience threats, fear, loss. In these examples and more, we can feel no longer quite adequate on our own, and we yearn for something else... someone else. Daniel found that someone else in God. And so he wrote to us the reader: “Cast your burden upon the Lord, and he will sustain you (vs 22)”. Phillip Brooks, a noted American preacher, put the thought this way, “Lord, I pray not for a lighter load, but a stronger back”. I think this is what the Psalmist meant. God is not pictured here as some cosmic good fairy who comes and takes our problems away. Rather, God comes and cares, supports and strengthens, inspires and encourages, so while we continue to carry our own burdens they will not weigh unbearably upon our bodies and souls.

What David discovered and wrote about here with conviction is that God supports people. And so it can be to God that we can turn with our burdens, rather than trying to run from them, or avoid them, or fight and suppress them. And it was with this discovery..... this certainty firm in his mind that he penned his note of assurance to his readers, “Cast your burden upon the Lord and he will sustain you. He will never allow the righteous to be moved”. Praise God.