

“Distressing Towards God”

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Text: Psalm 16, 1 Samuel 23: 15 - 29

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Today we live with a heightened sense of insecurity compared to a generation ago. Doors that might once have been left unlocked no longer are. Our homes are defended with security bars on the windows and alarm systems. Helmets are a given today when biking or skiing. We wonder, if we were to get ill, how long will it take before I can begin treatment? We worry about the ingredients in our food and the products we use in our home. The recent, horrible shootings on The Danforth in Toronto is a pretty rare event in Canada but in its wake many people are a bit more concerned about their personal safety in public. Now, in truth, every generation has had its own worries. Think of the height of the Cold War, or the times of world war. The Depression. Times before modern medicine, or when the settlers here in Alberta lived wholly at the whim of the weather. But I wonder if today is maybe different, with many people carrying a low-grade, chronic level of distress that may not have been our experience in years gone by? Down through the ages, through different eras of distress, people of faith have found a degree of comfort and security in God. But that can be a hard thing to do. On the one hand, the technology and services in our society seem to have displaced a need to rely on God for many people. But I think, too, that it is harder today to learn how to go to God with the worries of our lives and find a sense of security, comfort, confidence, and hope.

David experienced a profound period of insecurity. Saul wanted to kill him because Saul saw David as a threat to his rule as king. David—the victor over Goliath and the successful military commander—was a celebrated hero among the Israelites. Even Jonathan—Saul’s eldest son and heir to the throne—thought that David should be the next king. Add to this the probability that Saul was mentally ill and more than a little paranoid. So in this part of David’s story David was on the run with Saul and his army in hot pursuit. And if that wasn’t enough of a worry, some of the locals volunteered to be on the lookout for David, promising to let Saul know if David was spotted. This amateur spy ring proved very helpful for Saul, for every time David relocated to a new hiding place Saul heard about it. The story says that Saul and his men were “closing in on David” when Saul was forced to give up the hunt to deal with the Philistines. Give up the hunt for the moment.

How did David cope with his sense of insecurity, being chased for his life? Psalm 16 gives us a window into that. The petition of his prayer, in verse 1, is as brief as it can be: “Protect me, O God”. David was pleading for his life: “Protect me!” Here is the first lesson that comes from this psalm: anyone can be overcome by troubles. David—the anointed future king, the one God was going to use to change Jewish history, the capable military commander—even the likes of David could feel very insecure...like any of us. Then the first verse ends with the reason why he was pleading before God. He wrote, “for in you I take refuge”. It is a very common expression in the Psalms – “God is my refuge and my strength”. But the question is, Why? David was able to turn to God in his distress because he trusted God to help. This verse should be read with confidence: “**YOU ARE my refuge**”. You are. In Psalm 25 David says this more strongly, even putting God on the spot for his trust! He

prayed, "O Lord my God, in You I trust, so don't let me be put to shame!" In other words, I've put all my eggs in your basket. Don't disappoint me!

What does this kind of trust in God do for someone? Let's do a thought experiment. Can you imagine yourself rock climbing? Better yet: imagine yourself rock climbing without a safety rope. Without a rope you are all on your own. You have only yourself to depend on. So, how far would you be willing to climb without the security of a rope? I think the anxiousness of our age comes from something like this. Life can feel like climbing without a safety rope. But now imagine you are tied to a safety line. The climb won't seem so daunting... dangerous..., will it? The climber won't be as nervous, anxious. She can trust the safety line – and the one holding the other end – to save her if she falls. Is the climber completely out of danger attached to a safety rope? No. Will it mean she won't fall? No. But now something is holding you, helping you, as you face what distresses you. That's what this kind of trust in God can do for us. That's what it did for David. In verse 5 we hear David say to God, "You are my chosen cup, you hold my lot". Putting it another way, he's saying "I've thrown my lot in with You... I'm in your hands". This helps us see the second thing we can take from this psalm: the act of trusting in God can give us greater confidence to face what distresses us, because in the act of trust we remember God's helping hand.

Stepping out into the distressing things of life while holding onto God does two things. First, it focuses the mind. Back in the days when I used to climb I saw plenty of novice climbers clutch their safety line in a death grip. Their fear of falling drove them to cling to the rope. The same thing happens when we give God more of our trust in distressing times, and that's a good thing. In turning over more trust to God we are shifting where our anxiety is going. Our attention moves from our focus on what is worrying us to a focus on God. And that little bit of anxiousness we take with us (the worry and wonder whether God might really help), that helps us stay attentive on God. The psalmist here says, "I keep the Lord always before me" (vs 8). Rather than focusing at the danger (like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights) and getting more scared, David looked up at God. That, in itself is a help. But there's more. By shifting our attention towards God, we can become more attentive for how God may actually be helping us. David did this, and as a consequence he said, "the Lord gave me counsel" (vs. 7). David tells us that God spoke to his heart, and his heart spoke to him. From this verse I get a sense that David perhaps intuited God's direction and help, rather than hearing a big booming voice. If this was the kind of help God was providing David, then you would need an attentive attitude to see it coming to you. This is the third help from this psalm: turn that worry whether God will help into attentiveness for how God might be coming to you.

David did this, time and again. He lived most of his life under the threat of death. First at battle with Goliath, then under the sentence of death by King Saul, and as a warrior king who led his army against their enemies. What did he say about God's help in these situations? In verse 10 we read, "You have never given me up to Sheol" (that is, death). What happens when you place your trust in another in an anxious situation, and then that one proves to be helpful and trustworthy? Here is the fourth help we take from this psalm. Seeing your trust fulfilled gives greater confidence to one's trust. David's confidence, gained over years of faith, was such that he could declare in verse 8, "Because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved!" Remembering how God has been there for you in the past is the greatest booster of trust, and that in turn can help us face the present distress with confidence and hope.

The final lesson from this psalm is that this kind of trust in God can make the worries of life seem less distressing. David actually remarks here on normal human physiology. When we worry we can get agitated. But what was David's physical reaction to his situation that was serious enough to make him plead for God's protection? He says, "because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved... my body rests secure" (vs. 8,9). Trusting in God's care is a source of relief. But for David in this psalm it went even beyond relief. His expectation that God would come through for him – as David trusted he would – that expectation was great enough that it prompted rejoicing in David. "Therefore" he writes, "my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices... in your presence there is fullness of joy!" (vs. 9,11). David saw God come through for him again and again and again, often enough that he could celebrate it, and celebrate it even in the midst of the stuff that worried him in the moment. Even in the midst of a threat that prompted him to plead before God "Save me!"

I don't know how many of us can do this last bit: feel joy in God in the midst of distress! Even for us as people of faith I think this age of anxiety is always dragging our focus back to the insecurities, and back to the uncertainties. It's so powerful we can become like the horse and train in Alex Colville's painting: so locked on what is barreling down upon us that it seems inescapable. But if we break that gaze with what's worrying us, we can shift to look towards our God who promises to help us with the distressing stuff of life. And this psalm points us in the way. Know that troubles can overtake anyone, including David, including us. Trusting in God's help can give us greater confidence to act, because God can be like the safety rope. Letting that trust create attentiveness on God can help us sense God's help. Remembering how God has helped you in the past can give assurance to your trust. And in the act of trusting, our sense of anxiety and insecurity can decrease, and we can "rest secure" as David put it. Doing this is a faith habit that anyone can develop that can serve you. But more than that: it is a faith habit that can actually strengthen your faith in its practice...and perhaps even help you experience God. And what a help that would be!