Anxiety and the Confidence that Beats it
Psalm 27

I suspect that when we were kids, virtually all of us were afraid of the dark. You'd go to bed and you have this fear of the monsters that might be lurking in the cupboard. Or you'd check under the bed to make sure something green and horrible wasn't hiding there, ready to sneak out the moment mum or dad went out the door.

But then you grow up, and you're not afraid of the dark anymore. In fact, I suspect some of us would even claim not to be afraid of anything. And even if you're a bit more honest than that, whilst there are some people who really are prisoners to fear, the rest of us would hardly say fear was a huge issue for us.

But what if we change the word 'fear' for 'anxiety' or 'worry'? Then things are different, aren't they? Because I don't think any of us would claim not to feel anxious about something at some stage in our lives. In fact, sometimes barely a day passes when we don't experience some twinge of anxiety or pang of worry. And the Psalm we're going to look at today, Psalm 27, speaks precisely to this issue.

Read Psalm 27

The Answer to Anxiety
So the psalm opens with two rhetorical questions: v1, 'Whom shall I fear?... of whom shall I be afraid?' Now the guy who was asking those questions, who wrote this Psalm, was David – a king. And like many an ancient king, or a modern politician, David had plenty of reasons for being afraid. In verse 2 he talks of 'when evildoers assail me' and of 'my adversaries and foes.' In v3 he writes 'though an army encamp against me' and 'war rise against me.' And these were no ideal threat for him were they? As a young man David was slandered by those in power, and hunted down like an animal. When he became king he had to deal with enemies within and without his kingdom, including a full-scale rebellion and attempted coup led by his own son. So David knew what it was to face threats that could very easily, understandably, result in fear.

But you and I aren't ancient kings are we? And none of us are likely to face the kind of threats that he faced. And yet, I'm not sure we're so far removed from him. We may not label it as fear, but what about the anxiety you might feel at work about how secure your position is? David faced the plotting and scheming of those he trusted. Well, that's not a million miles from some of the manoeuvring and jockeying for position that goes on out there in the workplace. And if David felt, rightly, at times that his life was in danger, what about the health scares you might face. And all of that without mentioning anxiety for our families, or how our children are going to turn out, or our finances. Or even, frankly, our worries about what other people might think of us.

So, whilst we may not call it fear, we are still exposed, maybe even daily, to stuff that can cause anxiety – or fear – to rise up inside of us.

And look at how David describes some of the people taking sides against him: v2, 'when evil doers assail me *to eat up my flesh*.' When we were on holiday last

week we went for a couple of days into the Pilanesberg National Game Park in South Africa with our friends, to see all the wild animals. And one lunchtime we stopped at one of these picnic sites, which are enclosed with steel fencing to keep the animals out and you safe inside. And we were the only ones there, and we got all our lunch stuff out, and put it all on the table, standing around chatting, four parents, nine kids, when one of my girls said, 'Look, there's a Cheetah' and sure enough just 20m or less away from us, inside the picnic enclosure, was this cheetah, watching us, eyeing up his lunch whilst we ate ours. And being watched by a predator sure makes you eat your sandwiches quickly!

And David faces enemies that are like animals, predators, watching, ready to devour him. Now, you might hear that and think, well, at least I don't have enemies like that! Or don't you? Just think how bitterness and resentment and unforgiveness towards those who have hurt you, your enemies, can eat you up, and consume you from the inside out. Over the holidays I read Charles Dicken's book, Great Expectations. And in the book there is a character, Miss Haversham, who is now an old lady. But since she was a young woman she has spent every day wearing her wedding dress, which is now yellowed with age. She has in an adjoining room her wedding cake, sat on the table, covered with cobwebs. She never leaves the house and its windows are all shuttered, daylight is never allowed in, and every clock is stopped at 20 minutes to 9, the time she was told, on her wedding day, that the man she loved was a fraudster and had no intention of coming to their wedding. And the rest of Miss Haversham's life was spent held captive by that past, dragging as many others down into her bitterness and hurt as she could. She is a powerful image of how enemies, and those who hurt us, can consume us from the inside out, and we, in turn, consume others.

So, can you see how we are not so dissimilar to David? We face stuff that can cause fear or anxiety to rise up in our hearts, we have our enemies, some of whom even threaten to consume us, if we allow them. The question is, of course, why do we fear something in the first place? Why do we become anxious about things, and then have these things dominate our lives and our thinking?

Well, the reason is that compared to what we face we can feel small, or vulnerable. We feel at risk. This thing seems bigger than us, it may even threaten to overwhelm us. Or at the very least, we don't feel as if we can control this situation, and it leaves us feeling at the mercy of events, and of others.

Which is what makes what David says all the more remarkable. Because in essence he says, 'I will not fear, I will not be afraid': v3, 'Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.' And confidence is pretty much the polar opposite of anxiety isn't it?

So why can David say that? Well, he tells us, v1: 'The Lord is my light and my salvation… the Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?' And that's the answer to David's confidence against the odds, because fundamentally, it wasn't based on his ability to sort the situation, or on his skills of statesmanship, or the strength of his armies, or who he could call upon for support. His confidence was based upon God and his ever-present protection.

And I want you to think about that, because understanding where your confidence lies is crucial in this battle against fear and anxiety and the bitterness that can follow. I mean, just ask yourself, where do you put your confidence when trouble comes your way? In your own abilities? In your bank balance? In others? And none of those are wrong in and of themselves, but if you put more weight on them than they are made to bear then they will fail you. It would be like bungy jumping off a tall bridge using an elastic band designed to keep your hair in place (if you have any). We put our trust in stuff that is just not designed to take that kind of load. And money runs out, and plans fail, and friends turn away, and the elastic band snaps.

But God never does. And that is what David has learnt in the ups and downs of life. And when you know God in all his greatness, when you know that he is in supreme control and that nothing threatens him or causes him to fear, then instead of this situation you face growing bigger in your eyes, it begins to shrink. And David describes the Lord as 'my light and my salvation.' And if fears and anxieties are like rats scurrying around in the basement of our lives, gnawing away at our peace and sense of wellbeing, then the Lord enters that situation, and turns on the light of his presence, and the darkness, and those fears that lurk and gnaw in the darkness, go scurrying away.

And understanding the security that he has in God leaves David with a sense of longing.

The Desire for More

Now, my favourite dessert, hands down, is treacle tart. You have a thin slice and it's so wonderful you just want a bit more, and a bit more, and a bit more. And in another psalm, Psalm 34, David says, 'O taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!' And David has tasted and he's seen, and he knows from his own personal experience that God is his refuge, and it just leaves him wanting more.

Verse 4: 'One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.' Now, what David is not asking is to become a priest and physically live in the tabernacle of God all his days. It's not as if he's known God's security in his life and in response he says, 'well enough of being a king, it's a monk's life for me!' and he withdraws to a monastery. No, he has experienced something of God in his life, he has known this sense of inner security and peace that comes from God, and he wants that to grow. And he's single minded about that: '*One thing* have I asked.' This is what I want to define my life: my relationship with you God. You see, if we are double minded, or half-hearted in our desire to know God and grow in our understanding of him, then sadly, very likely very little will come of it. But not David. Despite all his faults, and they were many, he has this desire, this single-minded, focused longing to enjoy God's presence and for that to grow.

And look how he describes it, v4 again: 'that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his

temple.' So, the one thing that David wants is actually two things: he wants to gaze and to inquire. He wants to gaze upon the beauty of God and to inquire of him. He wants to grow in his knowledge, his heart knowledge, his delight of God's beauty, his character, his steadfast love; and secondly he wants to grow in his understanding of God's will and his ways. That's why he prays in v11, 'Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path, because of my enemies.' In the midst of opposition, and all these reasons to fear, David wants to know God's way. In all that he faces, he wants to walk with God, and honour God, and maybe, not least, he wants to understand more of how this God of beauty and steadfast love, uses trials in his life to bring about his will.

And David knows that as he seeks God like that, and as his relationship with God deepens, that relationship will become like a protective shield over his head and like a rock under his feet, when everything else around him is shifting: v5, 'For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock.'

And it's knowing God ever deeper like that as your security, that means that rather than responding to events with fear and anxiety, we can know this confidence, and with it a genuine sense of happiness, and of joy even in the midst of trial. Listen to what David says in v6: 'And now my head will be lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.' So what is it that can make your heart sing when trouble comes, rather than shudder with fear or ache with anxiety? It's knowing and trusting that God is your security, and he will not let you down.

And yet, life is rarely so simple is it? Or at least, we are rarely so steadfast in our faith.

What To Do When You Wobble

You see one of the remarkable things about this Psalm is that just as David seems to be brimming over with confidence, it seems as though the reality of what he is facing kicks in. And suddenly, this man who seemed so strong and so sure in his faith seems vulnerable and uncertain, and wrestling with his doubts. Verse 8-9: 'You have said, "Seek my face." My heart says to you, "Your face, Lord, do I seek." Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger, O you who have been my help. Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation.'

So, despite knowing that God is his salvation, despite genuinely wanting to seek God and honour God with his heart, David is wobbling. He feels insecure. It's as if he sees the odds that are stacked against him, and he's agitated. And maybe you know what that feels like. You face this situation, or you have this issue going on in your life, and sometimes you feel strong in your faith, and you know God has you safe in his hands, but at other times you feel like you are sinking. One moment you're up here, and the next you're down here, and God seems distant and the fear comes back and the rats start gnawing away again.

And David gives us a clue into what lies behind that feeling of insecurity we all get. Ultimately, he is afraid that God himself will turn away from him, and then where will he be? He is afraid that God will abandon him, and abandon him because he, David, is not good enough, that he's not worthy enough, that he hasn't done enough to earn God's favour in his life. Look at verse 7, as David prays, 'Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud; be gracious to me and answer me!' You see, David knows that he needs grace. He knows that he needs God to be gracious to him, that fundamentally he does not deserve the Lord's protection. He knows that if God were to treat him as he really deserved to be treated he would be in a hole.

And it's that nagging realisation or fear that you and I may not be good enough, that we have not done enough, that we're not worthy enough to earn God's favour in our lives, that often lies behind our own plunges into despair or agitation or insecurity. Because if it rests on us – then deep down, unless of course we are a self-righteous and think ourselves better than others - we know we fail to make the grade.

Ok, so what can we learn from David in dealing with our own wobbles? Well, firstly David throws himself back on God. For all his wobbling he still knows, deep down, that God is the answer not himself. But right at the centre of this psalm is that prayer in v7, 'Lord, be gracious to me.' David knows he needs grace, and so do we. The question is, where can we find it? How can God treat a man like David and men and women like you and me better than we deserve?

The One who is Gracious

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul writes some of the most beautiful – and for those facing fear – some of the most heart-warming words in the Bible: 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors though him who loves us. For I am sure that neither death not life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present not things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8:35-39). Now, why can Paul say that? Why can he know this security in the love of God that you and I, just as much as David, long to know? Because of what he wrote just before: 'If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things' (Romans 8:31-32).

And that's how we can know. That's how we can know that God loves us, even when we don't make the grade. That's how we can know that deep sense of inner security, that his care for us and protection of us, has nothing whatsoever to do with us being good enough, or worthy enough. Because God has already poured out his grace upon us and given His Son for us. And Jesus has already done everything that is necessary to make us acceptable to God.

You see, David feared in v9 that God might hide his face from him; that God would turn from him in his anger; that he would be cast off and forsaken by God.

In v12 he is afraid lest God gives him up to the will of his adversaries, false witnesses who have risen against him, breathing out violence.

But it's at the cross that Jesus takes all of these, our worst fears, upon himself. False witnesses stand against him and his adversaries crucify him. And it's there, at the cross, that he takes our sin and our unworthiness upon himself; and it's there that he faces the anger of God, the wrath of God, for us. It's there that God the Father hides his face from him, where Jesus is cast off and forsaken by God, and cries out, in the darkness, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Why? Because he loves you, and so that you might never be forsaken.

And in v1, David says, 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?' And Jesus' name means, God saves, and he came saying, 'I am the light of the world' – light for your darkest fears and anxieties. And David's heart's desire was to gaze upon the beauty of God, and in Christ God was pleased to have all his glory – all his beauty - dwell in bodily form, and Jesus could say, 'If you have seen me, you have seen the father.' And just as David hoped for in v6, at his resurrection, Jesus' head was lifted up above his enemies all around.

And it's as we put our trust in him, in Christ, and all that he has done for us, that we will know this deep inner security, and the joy that comes with it. And it's that that gives courage to people like us, who are tempted to wobble, as David closes this Psalm out by saying, 'I believe', v13-14, 'I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord.'