

## How to Pray When You're Stressed

### Psalm 27

We're spending this summer in the Psalms which, if you're unfamiliar with the Bible, is a collection of prayers for every situation to learn how we can better connect with God through honest prayer; and this morning we're going to look at Psalm 27 and how to pray when we're stressed. Psalm 27 is one of the "day of trouble" prayers, written by King David when he was under a lot of stress, and while unlike David, we're unlikely to have an entire army out to get us. We are all subject to stress; whether it's from our schedule, our responsibilities or other people. Stress comes from without and stress comes from within. It can be caused by our own bad decisions or by things completely out of our control. Stress can be occasional like an approaching deadline or it can be constant like a crazy neighbor. A certain amount of stress is helpful – it gets us up and moving in the morning - but too much or too constant of stress damages us physically. One day several years ago, Laurie began to feel strange and I took her to our doctor who examined her and immediately put her in the hospital because her symptoms indicated some kind of heart problem. Since she had always had low blood pressure and a healthy heart, we were surprised and scared. After a bunch of tests, the doctors pronounced her healthy; but we talked to nurse after nurse who described similar symptoms they had which mimicked a heart problem but which had been caused by stress and exhaustion. That was our introduction to the impact stress can have on us physically. Stress can affect our sleep, can cause pains and aches, stomach problems and fatigue; as well as nervousness, anxiety, overeating, undereating, irritability and depression. Everybody deals with stress and Psalm 27 is not about how to escape from stress but how to triumph over stress. This psalm has two parts. In verses 1-6, David expresses his confidence in God in times of stress. Then in verses 7-14, how he prays in times of stress.

*"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 encamps against me, my heart will not fear; though war arise against me, in spite of this I shall be confident."* (1-3) Last year in our series entitled *Fearless* we learned that the command that appears more often than any other command is "Fear not." Fear is the opposite of faith because faith takes God more seriously than the things that we fear; which is what we see David doing here. Notice the questions David asks. "The Lord is my light and my salvation: whom should I fear? The Lord defends my life so whom should I dread? Each time my enemies have attacked me, God has thwarted them. Therefore, even though a huge army is against me, I refuse to be afraid. I will be confident." That's faith, taking God more seriously than the things we would normally be terrified of. That's why David was marked by supernatural courage. The first time we meet David in the Bible, even though he is only a boy, he's already braver than any man in Israel. Remember Goliath? Israel's army is camped on one side of a valley and the Philistine army on the other. Every day the two armies march out to face each other and a huge Philistine named Goliath challenges the Israelites to individual combat. "Send out your best warrior. If he defeats me, we will be your slaves, but if I defeat him, you will be our slaves." This happens every day for 40 days yet no Israeli soldier steps forward - until David shows up, bringing food to his older brothers who are in the army. When he hears Goliath's challenge and sees the fear in the Israelites' eyes, David asks, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should taunt the armies of the living God?" And you know the rest of the story. How was a boy able to do what thousands of men were afraid to do? Was David an adrenaline junkie? A hero? A man who didn't know the meaning of fear? David – as we'll see in this prayer – was just as scared as we are. But he had learned the secret of courage: living in the presence of God.

We know intellectually that God is more powerful than anything that can attack us or oppose us; that one plus God is a majority and that it doesn't matter who goes to war against us if God is on our side. But that knowledge doesn't keep us from feeling stressed or anxious when we are attacked. In the moment, our enemies look bigger than God. We are afraid. We are filled with dread and worry – and so was David. So how did David experience this profound confidence in God in the actual day of trouble? He tells us in vs. 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 tabernacle; 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.*" (4-6) It wasn't just the intellectual knowledge of God that relieved David from stress, it was God Himself. David had discovered that the best way to relieve stress is to live in God's presence. That's why David says, *"One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek:"* Now David obviously asked God for more than one thing; just read through the prayers of the psalms. But in the day of trouble and the times of high stress, David says the one thing I need, the one thing I seek most is to dwell in the house of the Lord, to behold His beauty and to meditate in His temple – because in the day of trouble He will hide me and lift me up to safety and my head will be lifted above my enemies. Notice David is still surrounded by enemies but his head is lifted up. He's confident and at peace. It's not a matter of escaping from stress but triumphing over stress; as Allen Gardiner discovered as he starved to death physically but was completely satisfied spiritually with the presence of God. The way we find relief from stress is by making the experience of God's presence the top priority of our life, the "one thing" we ask God to give to us.

So what exactly is David asking for? He's asking to experience God. When the Bible talks about God's face, it means God's presence. In fact, the Hebrew word for "face" and "presence" are the same word. Being in someone's presence is literally being face to face, having a conversation together. That's what David means when he talks about dwelling in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. He doesn't mean never leaving the tabernacle where the ark was and where God manifested His presence. David means living the presence of God wherever he is physically, whether in the palace or on the battlefield. When David talks about beholding the beauty of the Lord, the Hebrew word means "the pleasurable perception of the Lord." David is talking about more than using God; he's talking about enjoying God, being overwhelmed with God's beauty and excellence. There is no more beautiful, attractive, delightful being in the universe than the God the Bible describes and the more intimate our relationship with Him becomes, the more we enjoy and are enthralled by the beauty of all that He is. That's why the word David uses for "behold" here means to gaze or stare at. We just can't get enough. We have been created to enjoy God's presence and it is the joy of His presence which relieves us from the stress and the fears of living in this world. When I was in college, there were times almost every week when I would get so stressed out by everything I had to get done or by studying for a test or by some conflict with somebody, that I'd jump into my little VW bug and drive down to the beach and just sit on the sand for awhile and look at the ocean. The beauty of the sea calmed me down, refreshed me and enabled me to go back to work. That's what beauty does. Beauty calms us down, turns down our restlessness and anxiety. Some people listen to music. Others read a great book. Others watch a movie. I think that's why one of my favorite films is *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. It always calms me. It's not a great film. The acting is ok but it got very lukewarm reviews. But it is a beautiful film. The scenery, the music, the pace of the film, the story, even the golf refreshes me and gives me a feeling of peace. However, any earthly beauty is only the faintest echo of the beauty of the Creator Himself. That's why Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, "My soul does not rest until it rests in You O Lord." Augustine wrote that we are listless, anxious and restless until we find God and that was David's experience as well. Only one kind of beauty can satisfy us entirely. That's why David writes in Psalm 16:11, *"In Your presence is fullness of joy and in Your right hand are pleasures forever."* And why Isa. 26:3 says, *"The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You."*

Why is experiencing the presence of God the main thing David prays for? *"For in the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tabernacle; 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."* Why is David so confident in God? Because he lives in the presence of God and as a result, he experiences God's victory over stress and fear. Apart from God, David is just as frightened and stressed out as any of us. With God, David is confident and at peace. Again, it isn't the academic knowledge of God that relieves stress; it is the presence of God Himself. Stress should drive us to the presence of God for the relief and the courage we need. The night He was crucified, Jesus prayed while His disciples slept. He told them, "Keep watching and praying so that you will not enter temptation; the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." Jesus prayed and was able to walk through His arrest, trial, torture and crucifixion with confidence and faith. The

disciples slept and ran away at the first sign of trouble. It is the presence of God which gives us what we need for the moment. Sometimes we experience His presence as strength and courage, sometimes as delight or joy or peace, but whatever we need, we find it in Him. That's why David says, "One thing I have asked from the Lord..." David knew that when he had God, he had all he needed.

Vs. 1-6 describes where David is, vs. 7-14 explains how he got there. How exactly do we experience the presence of God? How do we dwell in His temple, gaze at His beauty and meditate in His temple? Notice what David prays for in the following verses. First, David seeks God's face or presence. *"Hear, O LORD, when I cry with my voice, and be gracious to me and answer me. When You said, 'Seek My face,' my heart said to You, 'Your face, O Lord, I shall seek.' 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."* (vs. 7-10) What's David praying for here? He's asking to experience God's presence in prayer and I want you to notice two things about this prayer because each is critical to experiencing God. First, beholding the beauty of the Lord requires discipline. To experience God's presence we must make time for Him in our lives; draw near to Him and search for Him; which is what David did. That's why he writes, *"When You said, 'Seek My face,' my heart said to You, 'Your face, O Lord, I shall seek."* The Hebrew word for "seek" means to diligently search for, to pursue. Notice that David is obeying God. God commands us to seek His face. God's presence isn't something that just comes on us out of nowhere; it's something God commands us to seek. James 4:8 says, *"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you."* Who experiences God's presence? Those who make seeking God their top priority. That's why David prays, *"You commanded me to seek Your face and I have. Now let me experience Your presence."* David knows that God wants him to experience His presence and to behold His beauty. That's why God commanded us to seek Him and why David can ask God to not hide His face from David in anger. That tells me that experiencing God's presence requires a disciplined search on my part. God will be only found by those who make the effort to find Him. If I only seek God when I'm in trouble or need something from Him; if God is just the means to what I want and not the end that I seek; if I pray one day and don't show up again for a week, I'm not going to experience the presence of God. Every good relationship requires effort; pursuing the other person, asking them questions, spending as much time together as possible and getting to know them. It's the same in our relationship with God. That's why Paul writes in 1 Tim. 4:7, *"Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness."* No discipline, no godliness. When we hear a skilled musician or watch an accomplished athlete, we don't think, "They sure are lucky to have received all that talent," because we know the hours they've spent practicing and perfecting that talent. All the studies show the difference between the top athletes and the top musicians and the top just about everything else isn't talent but disciplined training. One study surveyed musicians and the difference between the best musicians and the next level down was the hours they had spent in practice. As early as age 11, the difference between the best and everybody else was already a thousand more hours practicing. While other kids were playing, they were practicing. It's no different in our relationship with God. Experiencing the presence of God requires a daily discipline of reaching out to God in prayer. But it also requires desire. Experiencing God's presence is more than a mechanical discipline; it must be the desire of my heart. That's why David writes that when God said, *"Seek My face," "my heart said to You, "Your face, O Lord, I shall seek."* It's not enough to go through the motions of prayer or just put in time. My heart must be engaged. So how do I engage my heart in seeking God? David knew how much he needed God. *"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."* We experience the presence of God when we diligently seek Him because we remember how much we need Him. Even the people who love us most will fail us but the Lord will always be there for us. I'm pretty disciplined about seeking the Lord. My problem is that often my heart isn't completely engaged. What I've found helpful is to slow down my praying and really think about what I'm asking God to do and why. That way, prayer becomes much more of a conversation in which I am fully engaged rather than just mechanically going through a list of requests.

So according to vs. 7-10, experiencing the presence of God involves disciplined, passionate prayer; and according to vs. 11-12, it also involves coming to God for guidance on a regular basis. Notice that not only does David ask God not to hide His face or His presence from him but to *"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.” (vs. 11-12)* We looked at a similar prayer last week when we looked at Psalm 25. The Hebrew word for teach is torah which is what the Jews call the first 5 books of the Bible, *the Torah or the teaching*. David prays that God will teach him from His word; that God will lead him from the Scriptures because the Scriptures are the way God reveals His ways and paths and truth. The Bible doesn't separate the work of the Spirit of God in our lives from the word of God in our lives and we experience the presence of God as He teaches us and guides us through His word. If I want to live in God's presence, I must be in the Bible; and if I neglect the Scriptures, I am neglecting God because the Scriptures are the way He speaks to me and guides me. Notice the reason David asks God to teach him; his foes and adversaries. David is very aware of how dangerous life is and how much he needs God's guidance and protection. I know what some of you are thinking. "Bible study and prayer; that's the application every week. Is it really that simple?" Yes because the answer to all of our problems is always God and prayer and the Bible are the way we connect with Him. Spending time with God in prayer and in the Bible is like breathing or eating. You have to do it regularly to survive. You can't neglect it and go on what you've done in the past because it is a relationship and God wants us to walk with Him daily.

So how to I experience the presence of God? According to vs. 7-10, by seeking God's face in prayer; and according to vs. 11-12, by seeking His guidance in the Scriptures. Regular prayer and study are essential for living in God's presence but they are not sufficient. According to vs. 13-14, they must be united with faith. *"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.” (12-14)* Faith always believes before we see and so experiencing God's presence always involves waiting on God, trusting that even though we can't see Him or feel Him or understand Him yet, we will. David isn't happy about his enemies or about the day of trouble. He admits he would have despaired – except that he continued to believe he would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living and he clung to that hope. Disciplined prayer and study are essential for experiencing God's presence but they are not sufficient in themselves until we add faith; because there is almost always lag time between when we believe and when we experience; when our faith is being tested. That's why trusting and obeying God always seems harder on the front end than disobeying. There is instant gratification when we sin. The rewards of obedience usually don't show up until later. The prophet Elijah challenged the priests of the idol Baal to a battle of the gods. They would each build an altar to their god and pray and the god who answered from heaven with fire was the true God. All Elijah could do was to build the altar. God had to send the fire. All we can do is pray and open the Bible; and then trust God to send the fire of His presence in His own way and time. That's why faith is essential in experiencing God's presence.

And according to Psalm 27, God's presence is our great need in times of stress. The more consistently I live in the presence of God, the more resilient I become to the stressors in my life. The presence of God can be a place of comfort, but it can also be a place of terror. God is holy and we're not and when we come into His presence, we feel dirty and unworthy. That's why we need a Savior. The final words of Jesus on the cross were "It is finished," literally, "It is paid in full," and then He breathed His last. And the heavy curtain in the temple which separated the Holy of Holies where the altar and the ark were and where God manifested His presence from the rest of the temple lest anyone should enter into the presence of God and die was ripped from top to bottom. Why? When Jesus died, all of our sins were paid for and we were made acceptable to come into God's presence. When we put our faith in Christ, God declares us to be holy and blameless and pure and welcome in His presence. I can come confidently to God every day; not because I'm righteous but because Jesus is and God accepts me because of Christ.

