
PSALM 23

AIM: TO UNDERSTAND THAT WHEN WE ARE FEARFUL WE CAN TELL GOD ABOUT IT

What are you afraid of? Spiders, heights, snakes? I am afraid of most crawly things, but particularly earwigs!

But what about the more intense fears – cancer, the threat of war, a long term illness diagnosis, the fear of death of a loved one, the fear of death of ourselves? Sometimes our fears are impossible to avoid however hard we try.

One of the most majestic of all creatures is the tiger. For many years these big beautiful creatures have puzzled researchers. It seems that when tigers hunt they have a remarkable capacity for causing their prey to paralyse with fear, a capacity greater than any of the other big cats. As the tiger charges toward its hapless prey it lets out a spine chilling roar. Now you'd think this would be enough to cause the prey to turn and run for its life, but instead it often freezes and soon becomes tiger food.

At the turn of this century scientists at the Fauna Communication Research Institute in North Carolina discovered why you're likely to freeze to the spot rather than run when the tiger charges. When the tiger roars it lets out sound waves that are audible – the ones that sound terrifying – and it's also lets out sound at a frequency so low you can't hear it, but you can feel it. And so, as the tiger emerges from the undergrowth the flashing of its colours, the sound of its roar and the impact of the unheard but felt sound waves combine to provide an all-out assault on your senses. The effect is that you are momentarily paralysed, so even though there may be time to avoid the tiger, you are tricked into standing still long enough for the tiger to leap on you.

Our fears often operate in the same way. They paralyse us into inactivity, even when the real threat is not immediately upon us. Someone once said that Fear is the Darkroom where our Negatives are developed.

Psalms 23, that was read earlier to us, should reassure us of God being with us through any times of fear. We have everything we need, he lets us rest in green grass, leads us by quiet waters, gives us new strength, and guides us in the right paths. Many of the psalms are full of complaints, but this Psalm 23 is full of comforts, and the expressions of delight in God's great goodness.

Walter Brueggemann, who writes about the Old Testament, suggests that this and other psalms can be used to encourage expression of our deepest feelings of regret, pain, sadness and grief.

In fact, there is one short phrase in Psalm 23 that Brueggemann highlights as being a positive change from similar ones used previously in the Old Testament books. He says that this phrase is slightly different so it now has a praise element. To Israel, in the book of Exodus, God says 'Fear not, I am with you' and now in Psalm 23 v 4 the human voice says 'I will not fear – for you are with me!'

This praise element is achieved only by faithful speaking. The situation is changed – not by a visible action, not by external transformation, but by a word spoken authoritatively.

Do not be afraid – commandment

I will not be afraid as God is with me – decision

Nothing else will do but the determination that there is no need to fear as God is with us. Nothing else will do when dealing with fear of chaos, illness, death and abandonment.

This lament 'I will not fear for you are with me' is also a response to the yearning for assurance that this experience is not formless, that there is something that endures apart from the experience of loss.

During the bombing raids of World War 2, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them "Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow".

It is good to say expressions of trust. It is also important to express our fears to God.

Do you remember the gospel story about the storm on the lake? The disciples were so afraid and they eventually woke Jesus explaining 'Master, we are lost!', and Jesus stopped the storm immediately with one command. We may be able to use this as a picture for the times when life is troubles and turbulent, with personal anxieties bearing down on us like ten foot waves. At times like that there is no shame praying 'Master, we are lost!'

CS Lewis said: I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me."

So, I encourage you today to communicate to your heavenly father. Whether you believe in Him sometimes and not others, He believes in you. He is waiting for you to approach Him and will wait patiently until you are ready. Tell him what is on your heart and mind. Tell Him the deepest darkest problems that you somehow think He doesn't already know about. Tell Him how you are lost now a loved one has died. Tell Him how you don't know how to cope with this diagnosis you have. Thankfully, God can pick sense out of a confused prayer. We don't need the words, we can lament in moans and groans if needed. God knows what we are attempting to express. Keep those communication lines open. How tragic it is that Christ went more readily to the cross, than we are able to approach God's throne of grace.

I have gathered together some prayer suggestions and they are out on the table at the back. Have a look at the end and if you would like to take one or all three home then please do. They are prayers that may help you start to pray those prayers of pain and sorrow.

Let us finish with a prayer:

In darkness and in light,

In trouble and in joy,

Help us heavenly Father

To trust your love

To serve your purpose

And to praise your name

Through Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen

God of Time and Eternity

God of time and eternity
Be with me in new beginnings
When I am vulnerable and afraid;
Protect and enfold me

God of heaven and earth,
Be with me in the continuing
When I am pressured and frustrated;
Let me go forward in confidence and strength.

God of joy and sorrow,
Be with me in the endings
When I need closure and cannot let go;
Bring me peace and fulfilment.

Lord have mercy on our beginnings
And save us from the love of novelty alone.
Christ have mercy on our continuings
That we may patiently bear the setbacks along the
way.
Lord have mercy on our endings

That at the last we may come into your presence
rejoicing.

Holy Trinity, give us vision, focus and purpose
In our beginnings, continuings and endings,
For you are the Alpha and Omega of all things.

Lord of Healing

Lord of my darkest place:
Let in your light

Lord of my darkest fear:
Let in your peace

Lord of my most bitter shame:
Let in your word of grace

Lord of my oldest grudge:
Let in your forgiveness

Lord of my deepest anger:
Let it out

Lord of my loneliest moment:
Let in your presence.

Lord of my truest self, my all:
Let in your wholeness.

Looking Back

(Take either a small stone, or a hand held cross or
light a candle - this can be a focus)

Choose one of the following prayers or all 3:

Pray: Lord I am afraid of...

Pray: Lord, I feel angry about...

Pray: Lord, I am deeply sad about...

(Turn your hands upwards - the object can still be
placed on your hand as appropriate and if helpful)

Choose one of the following prayers or all 3:

Pray: Lord I thank you for...

Pray: I am joyful about...

Pray: I am grateful today for...

Pray: In darkness and in light,

In trouble and in joy,

Help us heavenly Father

To trust your love

To serve your purpose

And to praise your name

Through Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen