

If You Were To Ask God One Thing...

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[0 : 00] The reading this morning is from Psalm 27. It's page 557 in the church Bibles.

The page 557, Psalm 27. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes who will stumble and fall.

Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear. Though war break out against me, even then I will be confident. One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.

For in the day of trouble, he will keep me safe in his dwelling. He will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock. Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me.

[1 : 26] At his sacred tent, I will sacrifice with shouts of joy. I will sing and make music to the Lord. Hear my voice when I call, Lord.

Be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you, seek his face. Your face, Lord, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger. You have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, God my Savior. Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.

Teach me your way, Lord. Lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors. Do not hand me over to the desire of my foes. For false witnesses rise up against me, spouting malicious accusations.

I remain confident of this. I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord. Be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

[2 : 32] Amen. Well, good morning. And let me extend my own personal welcome to you all this morning.

It's good to be here. We've been away in Latvia for the last couple of weeks or so, visiting my in-laws. And it's good to be back here with you all.

Well, let's pray and ask God for his help as we come to think about this psalm that David wrote. Father, we thank you for your word to us this morning.

We thank you for the way that King David led your people in song. We thank you especially for David's greater son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our light and our salvation.

Thank you that as members of his body, we are part of Christ's choir. So teach us then by Christ's spirit to embrace the sentiments of this psalm and renew in our hearts our confidence in him.

[3 : 51] For we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, if you are new to this country, you'll no doubt quickly begin to realize that it's a pretty strange place.

There are certain oddities about how we conduct ourselves here and interact with one another as a nation. Peculiar etiquette, social mores and norms that have to be adhered to that seem to glue our society together.

For instance, it's well noted that complaining about the weather is our national pastime. This past week, of course, was too hot at the beginning of the week and too wet by the end of it.

Or think of how we greet one another in general society. It used to be the case in parts of society, at least, that the greeting, how do you do, was always followed rather curiously, I thought, with how do you do?

Or pleased to meet you if it was a first encounter. Nowadays, of course, when you're greeted with how are you, the only acceptable standard form of reply is not too bad or fine, thank you.

[5 : 06] How are you? If you're feeling particularly enthusiastic. Of course, you don't want to appear too enthusiastic lest you come across as a kind of unhinged, radical sort of a person.

And just you try it and see what happens. Just try giving a non-standard reply in certain parts of society and see how you get on. You'll be met, perhaps, with a raised eyebrow, if not the look of abject terror as the person you're speaking to fears that you're about to share your life story with them.

It doesn't matter if you've had a fantastic week or if you've just had major knee surgery, limbs hanging off and your house is lost to subsidence. When somebody asks you, how are you?

That's your cue. Fine, thanks. Not too bad. Hopefully we get beyond this hopelessly British superficiality when we greet one another at church, at least most of the time.

I know we do. We've just done that, haven't we? Because very often, actually, very often under the surface, things are not fine.

[6 : 23] And this morning, some of us here are struggling and some of us are suffering in one way or another, dealing with disappointment or heartache or pain to varying degrees.

And for some of us here this morning, you may just feel that you've been through the ringer this past while. Life's been a roller coaster. Whatever it may be, buffeted this way or that.

Look at verse 2. The wicked advance against me to devour me. We may not be facing precisely the same struggles as the psalmist David describes.

But for the persecuted church, for our Christian brothers and sisters in Ukraine too, the hostilities described in this psalm will have a particular resonance.

And as part of the body of Christ, we share in that suffering. We stand side by side with our Christian brothers and sisters. The psalm speaks of being disowned by parents.

[7 : 37] And isn't that exactly the experience of many brothers and sisters who convert from Islam to Christianity? And the reality is the Christian life entails spiritual warfare for us all.

Our battle is against sin and death and the powers of darkness. And in a fallen world, the Christian life is far from easy.

It's impossible for Christians, I've heard it said, to be formed into the likeness of Christ without going through some kind of suffering.

In the psalm we just read, King David knows what it is to suffer greatly, to encounter hostility and opposition, enemies that would devour him like beasts, armies bearing down on him.

Verse 3. Who knows what it's like to be rejected and forsaken, to be maligned by false witnesses, to cry out to the Lord in anguish and desperation.

[8 : 42] And yet, for him to also, for him to also have the confidence that the Lord will be his deliverer in the end. To have the confidence in the Lord to meet head-on whatever challenges and opposition may arise.

So what's his secret? Well, we've got two headings this morning. If you look in your notice sheet you'll see three but I've had to conflate them for the sake of time so there's two.

Firstly, intimacy with the Lord issues in confidence in the Lord to face our struggles. That's the first six verses. Secondly, intimacy with the Lord is fed by confiding in the Lord to deal with our struggles.

And that's the second part of the psalm. Firstly then, intimacy with the Lord issues in confidence in the Lord to face our struggles. Look with me at verse four.

If we were to ask for one thing of the Lord, I wonder what it would be. I read somewhere that if we want to get an understanding on what our desires are then we can just look at our search history on the internet.

[10 : 06] If we were to ask one thing of the Lord, what would it be? Well, here's David's one thing. One thing have I asked of the Lord. This only do I seek.

That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. That's his secret. That's where his confidence is found.

His confidence in the Lord is rooted in verse four. Towards the end of our time in Latvia we stumbled across an outdoor water park and our children had never been to a water park before.

They'd never seen a water park before. They'd never seen anything like it. But once they'd seen it that was it. There was no stopping them and it blew their minds. Water slides, fountains, pirate ships, you name it.

Our problem was getting them out. Hours later shivering with cold, chattering teeth, hypothermia setting in. Right kids, it's time to go home.

[11 : 13] No! No daddy, no! We want to stay here forever. Well in verse four using temple imagery to speak of God's presence, proximity with God.

David is similarly single-minded in his resolve to spend all the days of his life not on our water slides, nor in our warm jacuzzi full of children.

That's how we warmed them up and it was impossible to get them out of. but in close fellowship with God, basking in the radiance of God's love.

This is David expressing his impassioned desire for intimacy with the Lord. It's here in the intimacy of God's presence that he's able to do two things.

Firstly, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and secondly, to seek him or in other words, in other translations, to inquire of the Lord. So he desires to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord.

[12 : 25] Not literally, of course. He knows from Exodus chapter 33 that to gaze on the Lord would be to die. But we have here the language of devotion, of adoration, of worship.

It's about perceiving, about contemplating, meditating on God's beauty to be so enamored and so enraptured by God's attributes.

I recall a scene in an Italian film, Cinema Paradiso, where the lead character's teenage self is so besotted by the beauty of a fair-haired girl that he's prepared to spend a hundred nights, come rain or shine, waiting under her balcony, seeking her face until she returns his love.

That's an imperfect image, a little bit stalkerish, actually, but it's that kind of single-hearted devotion that's in view here. My heart says of you, verse 8, seek his face, your face, Lord, will I seek.

For it is in the beholding of all that God is and has promised and has done for him that David's able to grasp and declare in verse 1 that the Lord is my light, illuminating the darkness, my salvation, delivering him from enemies, my stronghold, providing refuge from danger.

[13 : 54] Of whom then shall I be afraid? no one and no thing, not even, verse 3, if the barbaric might of a marauding army bears down on me, even then, he says, will I be confident in the Lord.

If the Lord is for us, who can possibly be against us? So he desires to gaze on the beauty of the Lord, but he also seeks to inquire of the Lord, to meditate on his will, to hear what God has to say.

That's part of what it means when he says, God is my light. God's revelation illumines his way. That meaning is drawn out later on in the psalm in verse 11, teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me in a straight path.

God is my light. So David's not only a worshipper seeking God's face, but he's a pilgrim seeking God's way.

And the more that we're able to gaze upon the majestic beauty of the Lord and greatness of the Lord, the more time we spend in meditation on God's will, the more confident in him we will become, the more perspective we gain on our present predicaments.

[15 : 16] So that's David's secret. That's the key to where his confidence is found. The single-minded pursuit of perpetual intimacy with the Lord.

He practices the presence of God. This is why he can be confident when he's up against it.

This is why in verse 6, fear turns to joy. And for us, for us, it is an invitation, isn't it?

An invitation to draw near to God so that we might be better equipped to face our struggles day by day. So we need to lay hold of verse 4 to appropriate for ourselves this same singular desire for intimacy with the Lord.

One thing we ask from the Lord, that we may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives. As we do so, we need to remember that this is a very real privilege that we have.

[16 : 27] One for us by Jesus Christ, the one whom David points forward to. You see, the only way it's possible for us to have a relationship with the Father is through the Son, who for all eternity enjoyed that profoundly intimate relationship with the Father, a loving relationship for all eternity.

And it's only because he was willing to give that up, that intimacy, that our relationship with God has been restored. And by which affords that intimacy that we can now enjoy through Christ.

And we're going to be thinking about that a little bit more in our second main section, confiding in the Lord through urgent prayer. Intimacy with the Lord is fed by confiding in the Lord to deal with our struggles.

What we need then, if we're to have David's confidence, is the cultivation of this intimate, personal relationship with God.

For it will sustain us when every other pillar crumbles. And you know, if we make anything else our pillar, anything else other than the Lord Jesus Christ, anything else our salvation and stronghold of our life, then we'll have much to fear and much to lose.

[18 : 04] But to pursue this intimacy of relationship with God, we need the discipline of growing fervency in prayer. If David's confidence is rooted in close fellowship with God, then he also knows that such fellowship cannot be continued unless it is continually fed by prayer.

And I think that's what the psalmist is showing us in the second half of this psalm. He's showing us how to pursue that relationship, particularly when we're facing strife, through urgency in prayer.

Hear my voice when I call, Lord. Be merciful and answer me. I think it's just worth taking a little step back here and noticing that there's an apparent shift in mood in these verses.

It has the bold confidence that we saw in the first half been replaced by an air of desperation. Don't hide your face from me. Don't turn your servants away. Don't reject or forsake me.

Has this confidence in the Lord drained away? Has his joyful rest in the Lord turned to panic? Well, I don't think so.

[19 : 20] I think rather that this psalm presents to us a realism, an honest appraisal of what it's like to be confronted with such enmity, such opposition, such hostility.

What it's like on the ground. The theologian Don Carson wrote a book, *How Long, O Lord*, which is his reflections on evil and suffering, which I found helpful, too, in thinking through this psalm.

But in his introduction, he describes the book as preventative medicine. In other words, it's not written in mind for those who are actually experiencing suffering at the present moment, but to prepare Christians with thinking rightly about suffering so that they're equipped in advance of trials that they may one day face.

I think there's something a little bit like that going on here. It is a sense in which the first half of the psalm is about getting the theory right that our confidence in the Lord is rooted in an intimate relationship.

And the second half is the prayerful outworking of that theory, the urgent pursuit of that relationship through earnest prayer. See, it's one thing in theory.

[20 : 44] When you're faced with mounting opposition, when all around things seem to be pressing in on you and you feel abandoned and betrayed, then the reality on the ground is that no matter how steeped in gospel truth we are, no matter how confident in the Lord we are, the reality is that sometimes we're just knocked for six by what life throws at us.

And indeed, it's sometimes when we're facing our darkest and toughest struggles that God can seem to us, so in fact it's not the case, but it can seem to us at the time, in those moments far away.

And the psalmist here is showing us that it's in those times especially that all we can do practically is to cry out to the Lord in urgent and fervent prayer, hear my voice, Lord.

Hide not your face from me. And in this, does Christ not provide us with the perfect example?

The correspondences in this psalm between David's sufferings and Christ's sufferings are striking. Our King Jesus Christ shared David's great confidence amidst yet deeper hostility.

[22 : 10] His enemies desired his death and used false witnesses to provoke violence against him. His own family for succumb. And consider again verse two, when the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is they who will stumble and fall.

We are told in John's gospel account that when the mob came of Judas to arrest Jesus, they drew back when they encountered Jesus and stumbled and fell to the ground.

But picture Jesus during the night before in Gethsemane. And you can almost imagine him taking the words of this psalm to his lips and praying this psalm, pouring his heart out to the Father, distressed by the prospect of drinking the cup of God's wrath.

One thing that I seek, to gaze upon you all the days of my life, please take this cup from me. cast me not off, hide not your face from me, O God of my salvation, forsake me not.

Jesus' one desire was for the presence and fellowship of the Father. And so he prayed with loud cries and tears. Jesus in Gethsemane single-heartedly agonized in prayer, pursuing intimacy with the Father.

[23 : 37] But that was exactly, that was exactly the one thing that Jesus could not have. And he was prepared to give that up for us.

The loving gaze of the Father would be withdrawn at the cross. Remove this cup from me, he prayed. And yet not my will, but your will be done.

Jesus was prepared to endure the cross, to sacrifice that intimacy with the Father, to be forsaken by the Father in unimaginable abandonment.

But he also knew that on the other side there was joy that awaited him. He was confident that in the end he would be delivered from death, that he would be lifted high, risen from the dead, exalted and ascended on high in heaven at the right hand of God, restored to that intimacy.

see. The Father and Mother forsake me, and yet the Lord will receive me. And yes, in the end the Father did receive him in glory, but the root for getting there was suffering on the cross and God forsaken us.

[24 : 56] And because he was prepared to go the way of the cross, one day all his enemies will be put under his feet. And because he was prepared to go the route of the cross, one day our desire, our one desire will one day be realized.

You see, the psalm closes in the same spirit of confidence with which it began. I remain confident of this.

I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. We, if we are followers of Jesus, will one day gaze upon the beauty of Christ's glorified face and night will be no more.

We will need no lamp or sun for the Lord God will be our light. And meanwhile, we live in an awkward in-between time in the land of the dying.

Struggle, pain and suffering are the common lot of the believer, this side of the return of Jesus Christ. However, the Christian has this great hope and assurance of the resurrection to come and our ultimate deliverance and the comfort of intimacy with God in the meantime.

[26 : 20] And so we must wait for the Lord and we must pray on for greater intimacy in our walk with Christ, confident in him who is our light, our salvation, and our hiding place.

Amen. Well, let's join together in prayer before we respond in song worship. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we give thanks to you for our Lord Jesus Christ.

We thank you that he was willing to give up that intimacy that he enjoyed with you for all time, that we may be restored in our relationship to you if we put our trust in you.

Lord God, we make David's prayer our prayer, one thing that we ask of you, Lord, that we would know a greater intimacy in our fellowship with you, that we would gaze on your beauty, and that we would seek your will as we submit to your revelation through your words, and that as we do so, as we seek your faith and your will, that we would grow in Christ's likeness.

And so we pray, therefore, that you'd build your church in this way. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.