

BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary

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Studies in Rescue and Redemption

Lesson Six

Rescue in the Day of Trouble

Focal Text

Psalm 27

Background

Psalm 27

Main Idea

We can be confident of God's presence during difficult days.

Question to Explore

How can we rely on God's presence during difficult days?

Quick Read

Even though he was often confronted by trouble and sometimes felt discouraged, David nevertheless remained confident in his faith because of his intimate relationship with God.

Introduction

Sooner or later, we all will face a difficult day—of one kind or another. If we live long enough, we may face many a challenging time. We may lose our job, get a terrifying medical diagnosis, be shocked and overwhelmed by the unexpected early death of someone we love, or even go through a dreaded divorce. How does a person survive such difficult, dark, and lonely times?

This is the question the psalmist explores in Psalm 27, and he has reached a conclusion. He decided to place his firm resolve and commitment in his belief that God would get him through it all. He even says if “my father and mother forsake me,” God will not

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(v.10). In other words, there may be moments when we feel like God has abandoned us, times when we feel like we are in the dark. But no matter what, God is still there. In fact, the psalmist says God is his “light,” and when he is afraid, God is his place of safety and his stronghold. God is the one who can calm his worst fears—simply through his presence.

In the Bible, Abraham experienced God’s calling in his life, and sensed that God was present with him. So, did Moses (e.g., at the burning bush; Exodus 3). David also felt a powerful sense of God’s presence with him. For David, God was his shepherd who stood beside him even as he faced the giant Goliath, and then time and again, as he faced battles (whether physical or spiritual). He found strength in his relationship with God and expressed it in his worship and song. Each of these figures found God’s presence to be the remedy for their distress, pain, or tragedy. Through it all, God’s presence was sufficient to meet their every need.

Once when I was kid, out with some of my friends, we got lost in the woods. Once our group realized we were lost, we got scared. The sun was setting and the sounds of the woods were all around us. Someone in our group began to sing Christian hymns. I did not grow up going to church, so I did not know very many of them, but I quickly learned and sang along. Even though it was dark, and the sounds in the woods around us grew louder and louder—the more we sang, the more our fears subsided. Our hearts began to beat softer and softer. Our singing together proved to be a remedy for our fears. Somehow, singing to God made us feel better, even safer.

Nobody wants to face difficulties. However, God’s presence is there to comfort and encourage us. In fact, the Bible tell us that sometimes God allows difficulties in our lives for a reason—sometimes the very purpose is to deepen our faith in him. The Apostle Peter described the difficulties of the early Christians along these lines when he said their suffering was like gold being refined in a fiery furnace (cf. 1 Peter 1:3-7). The fire would test the genuineness of their faith. So also, our faith, tempered in the fires of life, can become the very thing that draws us closer to God. As we go through the flames we know we are not alone—God’s presence is always there with us.

Commentary

Confidence and Prayer in God’s Presence (27:1-6)

Psalm 27 proclaims the psalmist’s confidence in God (referred to as “LORD,” which in capital letters is the sacred name for God in the Bible, *Yahweh*). The psalm prior (Psalm 26) expresses devotion to the Lord and desire to join his assembly in worship. This psalm is related to it with a concern for God’s temple and dependence on the LORD through prayer for vindication and divine deliverance. The psalm contains the heading “of David” and also refers to war (v. 3); this, together with the idea of sonship (v. 10) favors a royal interpretation.¹

27:1. The psalmist describes God (in Hebrew *Yahweh*) as “my light” and “my salvation” which are parallel and expanded by the description “stronghold of my life.” Together these terms show how God, in the psalmist’s understanding, is his protector who vanquishes the dark shadows and leads him in the “paths of righteousness” (cf. Ps. 23:3). As a “stronghold,” God is the place where the psalmist can go for protection from his enemies—with this safety and guidance, he is not “afraid” (v. 1).² This protective presence enables the psalmist to stand firm, even in the face of his enemies.

A stronghold was a type of fortification in the ancient Near East from before 5,000 BC. It was necessary when people began to live in settled communities but competed over resources. These military structures were used for defense. Cities with sufficient supplies of food and water could endure a lengthy siege—some even indefinitely (e.g., Samaria survived for three years; 2 Kings 17:5).³

27:2-3. The psalmist describes his enemies in several ways. Some are depicted as ravening beasts seeking to “devour” him (v. 2). A second depiction is that of an enemy military encampment or an army that besieges him (v. 3). Finally, he describes an all-out war which breaks “out against me” (v. 3b). However, despite the severity of the attack, the psalmist remains “confident.” He believes the enemy will “stumble and fall” (v. 2).

The psalmist’s calm assurance in the face of what would have otherwise been dreadful is a repeated emphasis in the psalms (cf. Ps. 3:6). Despite the efforts of his enemies he says, “my heart will not fear.” The phrase “my heart” refers to his personal fortitude based on confidence in the Lord which enables him to be unafraid. The Apostle Paul makes a similar confession of belief, stating that nothing could separate him from God’s love in Romans 8:31–39.⁴

27:4. The psalmist’s singular desire is that he may “dwell in the house of the Lord” for his entire life. Based on information we have today about this time, this seems to have been a common theme in worship—the desire or longing for continuous presence in the temple. This is also found in Mesopotamian and Babylonian incantation prayers. One such prayer seeks deliverance from illness by saying, “May I stand before you forever in worship, prayer, and devotion.”⁵

The phrase “house of the Lord” was a way of referring to the temple itself. Some translations render the words “all the days of my life” as “forever,” but it essentially refers to an extended period (cf. Lamentations 5:20). Priests were ones who literally lived or “dwelled” in the temple precinct, but this may not be the idea in mind, since the Hebrew text renders it: “I will return to the house of the Lord,” expressing the desire to go into the temple repeatedly. We know that some ancient worshipers (e.g., the Sumerians) tried to accomplish this by placing statues of themselves in the posture of prayer inside the temple so they could continuously be represented before their god.⁶

27:5. The psalmist says that God will keep him safe in the day of his trouble by hiding him in his shelter and setting him “high upon a rock.” This is a picture of God’s provision of protection. It is interesting how David’s psalms continue to shift their metaphors and now turns toward the image of Yahweh placing him atop a “high rock.” The Hebrew word for “rock” is used to describe large boulders but God himself is called a “rock” several times in the psalms. He is a place of firm footing and protective covering. The idea of “high on a rock” prepares the way for the next metaphor: the psalmist’s head being elevated and exalted above his enemies (v. 6). Therefore, to be protected by God in the presence of an enemy is an exaltation by association.

27:6. Even in the presence of his enemies, the psalmist describes himself as being exalted by God, and the writer offers his sacrifice with shouts of joy and singing. The picture of praise amid his enemies shows how rejoicing can remove our fears as we focus on God. It also shows how God’s protection and exaltation should prompt us to respond in praise. Apparently, the psalmist is now free from the fear of his enemy simply because of the presence of Yahweh, thus enabling him to freely sing praises and offer sacrifices to God.⁷

Prayer for God’s Presence (27:7-12)

27:7. Beginning in verse 7, there is a shift of tone in the psalm to more of a lament with the second half of the psalm (27:7-12) serving as the background from which the psalmist’s confidence had sprung. The change to a “second-person” direct address of God indicates the beginning of the next section of the psalm, and together with the string of imperatives (also with the Hebrew form known as the “negative jussive”), point to the psalmist’s plea for God’s deliverance.⁸ This comes across with the statement “Hear my voice.”

As in most pleas for deliverance, the psalmist entreats God to hear him. The cry indicates suffering, but also confidence in God’s ability to save. Since the cry is present, the deliverance has not yet taken place. Part of the plea begs God for his presence (esp. in the face of his seeming absence in vv. 8–10), but also expresses a desire for his instruction (v. 11) and vindication from the charges of “false witnesses” (v. 12).⁹

27:8-10. The psalmist asks God not to hide his face from him in anger. The idea of hiding one’s face was a common metaphor for showing displeasure or indifference. One of the poems that has survived from the ancient world describes a worshiper who cried out to his god, “I called to my god, he did not show his face.”¹⁰ The expression “show his face” was simply a way of God showing favor or making his presence known—or it could simply mean not answering the prayer. The psalmist is confident that even if everyone else forsakes him (even his own father and mother), that the LORD will not forsake him. So, his concern is only that God might hide his face, making all efforts at knowing him futile.

The phrase “seek his face” expresses the psalmist’s heartfelt desire to come into God’s presence. The heart’s deep desire has become the psalmist’s plea. Having already

explained his desire to remain forever in the house of the LORD, he now asks God not to leave him or be absent from him.¹¹ In the face of a variety of emotional expressions (vv. 8-10), the psalm contains a hint of hope that God will not be absent. Here the psalmist is exploring a feeling we sometimes experience when facing our difficulties or even our real enemies—those times when we may feel as though God has abandoned us.

27:11-12. Next the psalmist offers prayers for guidance and victory. He says, “Teach me your way” which resumes a theme which is characteristic of this collection of psalms (Ps. 23–30). In this collection the psalmist seeks divine instruction (“teach me”), and guidance (“lead me”) in the right “way” (v. 11). The right path contrasts with the attack of his “oppressors” (v. 11) or “foes” who want to defeat him (v. 11), or “false witnesses” who will revolt against him and spout malicious accusations (v. 12).

27:13-14. The psalm ends with a triumphant tone of confidence and a willingness to “wait” for the LORD—a reminder that trials can deepen our faith. The confidence expressed in these verses parallels that of Psalm 27:1-3. The psalmist says he is “confident,” which can also be translated “believes” or may even be saying that he “is convinced” he will see the “goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.” This is a clear reference to an expectation to be delivered in this life from whatever assails him. In other words, he believes he will get out of this situation alive.

Despite all his difficulties, the psalmist intends to guide the worshippers into a place of deeper faith while remaining convinced that God will come to his rescue (and that of his people). He is confident he will see God’s “goodness,” which includes his fellowship, his protection, his guidance, and his victory. This hope is squarely based on God’s promises. The phrase “the land of the living” describes “life” on earth over against the state of death (cf. Isaiah 38:11; Ezekiel 26:20).

These words of encouragement are like that of Moses’ words to Joshua (see Deuteronomy 31:7; cf. Joshua 1:6). The same God who redeemed Israel in the past is still the God of the present. He continues to deliver his people, all who are willing to “wait for the LORD” (cf. Haggai 2:4–5). One author puts it like this, “Here faith is the power which enables the faithful to endure the tension between his present afflictions and his future deliverance from those afflictions.”¹²

Conclusion

An old woodsman gives this advice about catching a porcupine: “Watch for the slapping tail as you dash in and drop a large washtub over him. The washtub will give you something to sit on while you ponder your next move.” I love that old joke because it illustrates well the fact that in life we face difficult moments when we do not know what our next move should be. However, for the Christian, we have something to help us. Better yet, we have “someone” to help us. In times of uncertainty, we can learn to rely on God’s very presence to help us. The psalmist says that the “LORD is my light and my

salvation.” He deliberately chooses to rely on God for his guidance (God is the light for the dark path ahead).

How can we learn to rely on God in challenging times? Some people naturally do this. From time to time we hear someone say, “I could not get through this without God.” In our church, just in the past few months we have had members who lost jobs, received a medical diagnosis that was terminal, and filed for divorce. As I talk with these individuals, I ask them, “How do you get through it?” Everyone always answers the same way, “I could never have gotten through it without God.”

I pastored a church that had undergone a tremendous tragedy. In the early 1970s, the church made it into the national news when more than a dozen students were killed in a tragic church bus accident. The tragedy of that experience affected everyone in the church, the community, and even many people throughout the nation (even the president came to the funeral). There was one family I came to realize that suffered especially through this event. One woman had lost two of her children in the accident.

A year later she lost a son in a different accident. As I sat in the front of her—many years later—at her home, I learned that she had recently lost her husband to cancer, and that now she, too, was in the final days of a terminal disease. However, despite all the tragedy she had faced—and all she was going through in that moment, she never wavered in her faith.

Through it all, she said that God had somehow given her strength; he had always been her “light and salvation.”

Meet the Writer: Dr. David Ritsema

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¹ Willem A. VanGemen, “Psalms,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 242–243.

² Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 483.

³ John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): The Minor Prophets, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 343–344.

⁴ VanGemen, 244.

⁵ L.W. King, *Babylonian Magic and Sorcery: Being “The Prayers of the Lifting of the Hand”* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1975), 52.

⁶ Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ps 23:6.

⁷ Wilson, 485.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Walton, 329.

¹¹ Wilson, 485–486.

¹² VanGemen, 248.