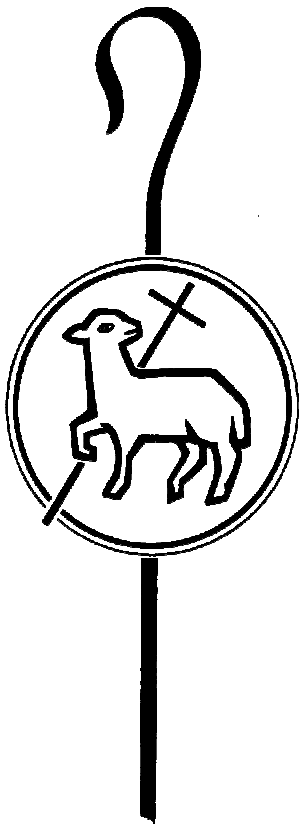


## feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading . (Isaiah 40:11)

April 18, 2013

Dearest family,



On Sunday in our “Psalm Pseries of Psermons”, we looked at Psalm 27, one of the psalms from the “confidence” genre. There are many psalms in this category with distinctive similarities of style and theme (16, 23, 27, 62, 73, 91, 115, 121, 125, and 131). What are some of the common features?

- They all maintain a note of consistent and persistent and insistent trust in both God’s availability and His ability to provide help and deliverance. Did you note the repetition of “help” and of “trust” when we skimmed through them?
- They share common images to present the nature and character of God: shield, fortress, stronghold, refuge, rock, shepherd, mother, father, guardian and protector, portion. You can understand why these are often called the “protective” psalms.
- However, although there is no question about the confidence they express, there are other things going on. The confidence is not smugness, or swaggering, or presumptuous. It is neither naive optimism nor doctrinaire assertiveness. There is nothing here of the rhetorical faith movement’s pragmatism dressed up as biblical faith, or of the prosperity heresy’s triumphalist claims on victorious provision. One observer has described these psalms as **“expressions of faith not cries of victory.”** There is a confidence that help is on its way, even though it has not yet necessarily arrived.
- In most of these confidence psalms there are allusions to, or in some cases, explicit mentions of trouble. In Ps. 121, the question “Where does my help come from?” assumes that there is a situation that needs help. Ps. 16 begins “Keep me safe O God.” That means there was a real threat. In Ps. 62, after saying he will never be shaken, there is reference to the assault and lies and curses that are being experienced.
- The reason I chose Psalm 27 is because it illustrates these features so well. Although there is evident confidence, there are places in the psalm where you cannot work out if it is a lament on the one hand, or a psalm of thanksgiving on the other. The psalm seems to go from extreme hardship to extreme blessing. What I am arguing is that these psalms of confidence are so true to our life experiences: they describe how we can be and feel “in the middle” in the way that it does not become a “muddle”. Though there is an element of lament, of deep need and even desperation, they do not have the very strong vocalizations of pain found in the laments. The psalmist has not as yet experienced the desired deliverance or salvation so it falls just short of an unbridled thanksgiving psalm.
- I’m suggesting that these psalms of confidence can be related to precisely because they are so uneven. The truth is that trouble and confidence do co-exist, don’t they? I like to describe them as being somewhere between lamenting and lauding. They border on both threat and thanksgiving. Though they openly articulate trouble, they equally openly declare the anticipated deliverance and thus sound like thanksgiving hymns.
- Don’t forget that these psalms are prayers. They are all about asking. Add this message to my asking series of three years ago! Confidence is the ground of our asking of God in the first place in a context of need and pain, and threat and discouragement, but confidence is exemplified in these psalms as the disposition post-asking as we wait for and anticipate God’s timely answers

and responses.

Once you've read Psalm 27, you realize just how much the psalmist has to ask about. Yet the psalm begins with a thundering declaration of confidence, despite the fact that there are plenty of things going on to undermine and subvert confidence. This is perhaps one of the best known and most consoling of the confidence psalms, but frankly, it's a bit of a roller-coaster. It's anything but a smooth ride. It divides into two distinctive halves, so distinctive that it has been argued that they can stand on their own as separate psalms. There is a serious mood change. But the psalm, as most of these poetic pieces do, has a very conscious structure:

- Vs 1-6: reads like a psalm of confident trust. God is addressed in the third person.
- Vs 7-12: reads more like a lament at the beginning. It is an intense and very moving prayer. God is addressed directly in the first person.

But in both halves, there is the presence of enemies, despite the testimony and experience of the presence of God. And note the pattern:

- Confidence in God before enemies
- Desire to seek God's face
- Desire to seek God's face
- Confidence in God before enemies.

Does this not make sense? This is not a divided mind or heart. This is not feverish belief one minute and faithlessness the next. This is the way it is: the uneven mix of both trust and trials, of both consternation and confidence. The mood swings are not to be the grounds for condemnation about fickleness. They are real spiritual mood swings, emotionally speaking, but when it comes to the bedrock matter of trust and faith in who God is, even though we don't know who we are or what's going on, God's character is unchangeable. Like the two psalms either side of it, 26 and 28, this psalm presents the invitation to an unchanging, undistracted focus on the Lord, and despite the confrontation, there is confidence.

What kind of psalm would we write in similar circumstances of threat and trouble? What is the basis of your confidence dearheart? What are the piranhas that eat at your faith and strip your confidence? What fears, what anxieties, what ignorances, what timidities, what self-doubts, what shames, what perceived weaknesses? Are there fissures and fractures in your confidence in what you believe; in who you are in Christ; in what you are doing with your life; in what your future is for; in how your relationships are growing? And what about false confidences? The falsities of human smarts, human strengths, human wealth, human wisdom? The false confidences of affiliations and reputations? The counterfeit sources of confidence – our equivalents of Egypt (Ezek.29:16) and flesh (Phils. 3:3)? What is the basis for your present confidence in your life? For your confidence in trial or in temptation? Are you confident in the land of the living? In Paul's terms, are you confident in the face of what is to come? Are you confident in the face of death? Are you confident about your eternal destiny, that to be with the Lord is preferable? Are you confident about standing at the judgment seat of Christ? Are you confident of the treasure in your jar of clay? Of the grace that is sufficient for your weakness?

As followers of Jesus we have such a greater and stronger confidence than David could ever have had:

- When it comes to unwavering grounds for confidence, we are this side of Holy Week.
- When it comes to the confidence to make our pleas, as in Psalm 27, to ask and seek, we can "approach the throne of grace with **confidence** so that we may receive mercy [cf. Ps.27:7 be merciful] and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Hebrs. 4:16)
- Do we not "have **confidence** to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus"? (Hebrs. 10:19)
- Is our faith not "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see"?

(Hebrs. 11:1)

- Did not the apostle John say that God has given us eternal life and that life is in His Son Jesus, so that if we are in Jesus, then “this is the **confidence** we have in approaching God; that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us.” (1 Jn. 5:14) This was also Paul’s conviction: “In Him and through faith in Him we can approach God with freedom and **confidence**.” (Ephs. 3:12)
- Addressing besieged Christians, the writer to the Hebrews is urging them to be content with what they have and he cites the grounds of their confidence by quoting Psalm 118: 6-7, “So we say with **confidence**, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”
- It was the same writer who urged his first readers, and us, to “hold firmly to our **confidence** and the hope in which we glory.” What confidence? A few verses earlier he had simply said, “Consider Jesus.” On the natural level, like the psalmist, all they can see are their persecutors and all that is ranged against them but they see Jesus, their apostle and their priest. It is the same language of Psalm 27: consider, literally fix your gaze – it is not a glance but a continuous look. Out of consideration and contentment comes confidence and continuity of faithful experience.
- Finally, in Hebrs. 10:32, the readers are actually invited to recall their Psalm 27 struggles, “hard struggle with sufferings”, but they had confidence when they were vandalized and robbed that they had “a better possession and an abiding one.” Again, how similar is the NT counsel to the OT psalmists’ invitation. “For you have the need of endurance so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised. **For yet a little while** (“wait” of Psalm 27) and the coming one shall come but my righteous one shall live by faith...we are not of those who shrink back... but of those who have faith and keep their souls.”

For the discussion about the psalm itself you will have to download the message. Let me conclude by reminding you that David’s place of confident safety was “the house of the Lord” (27:4) This was the place of confidence in the presence of the Lord. But there has been a change. According to scripture (Hebrs. 3:6) “we are God’s house if we hold fast our confidence.” In Paul’s words to the Corinthians, (2 Cors. 3:4) “Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God.” That is why he could eschew the false confidences in that passage of self-commendation or self-competence. Opposition was his daily experience but his confidence, like the psalmist, took him from lament to thanksgiving: “Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ.” Paul and David knew the same truths. Paul said that there was so much that was like “the smell of death” to human sensibilities but he was confident that to God, he was the aroma of Christ. This gives a whole new meaning to the next time your response to circumstance is “It stinks.”

Pastorally yours,  
Stuart

<http://www.christourshepherd.org/pastlet.htm> (and follow links to download MP3 audio of sermon)