

a SHELTER in the time
OF STORM

meditations on God and trouble

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Malcolm,
You have known me for many years,
yet you have remained my friend.
Thank you.

A Shelter in the Time of Storm: Meditations on God and Trouble

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Introduction: Hope in God in a World That Is Broken

It was the call no parent ever wants to get. Our daughter had been walking down the street in Philadelphia when a drunk and unlicensed driver careened onto the sidewalk and crushed her against a wall. It was the beginning of many, many months of travail. (By God's grace she is doing very well now.)

There are many mysteries to this moment in our lives that we will never solve. Yet, there are a few things that we know for sure. We really do live in a fallen world. We haven't been given a ticket out of the brokenness of this world simply because we are the children of God. What happened to our daughter was a horrible injustice, followed by day upon day of remarkable pain. The world we live in simply is not operating the way God intended.

There is a second thing we know for sure. There is a God of awesome grace who meets his children in moments of darkness and difficulty. He is worth running to. He is worth waiting for. He brings rest when it seems like there is no rest to be found.

But there is a third thing. You and I were just not hardwired to make our way through this fallen world on our own. We were meant to exist with eyes filled with the beauty of his presence and hearts at rest in the lap of his goodness. This is what I love about the Psalms. They put difficulty and hope together in the tension of hardship and grace that is the life of everyone this side of eternity.

It is not hard to recognize the environment of the Psalms. The Psalms live in your city, on your street, in your family. The Psalms tell your story. It is a story of hope and disappointment, of need and provision, of fear and mystery, of struggle and rest, and of God's boundless love and amazing grace. People in the psalms get angry,

grow afraid, cry out in confusion, survive opposition, hope for better days, hurt one another, help one another, run from God, trust in God, make foolish choices, ask for forgiveness, and grow wiser and stronger. They are people just like you and me.

Psalms 27 is a psalm of honesty and hope. Like real life, it is written between the tension of a life of trouble and a God of grace. It is a psalm of fear, but in it fear gives way to confidence. It is a psalm of danger, but it speaks with power and practicality of the safety that can be found in the Lord. In many ways it is a sad psalm, yet it is punctuated with songs of joy. It is a psalm of rejection, but it sings the acceptance of the Lord. It is a psalm of action, yet it finds its strength in waiting on the Lord. There are four things that draw me to this psalm.

1) *Its shock value.* David is writing about being under attack. The words are graphic and clear: “When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes. . . . Though an army encamp against me . . . though war arise against me. . . . For false witnesses have risen against me, and they breathe out violence.”

These would be difficult circumstances for any of us, but think with me: if you were in the middle of them, what is the first thing you would pray for? What is the central thing you would desire? You almost can't help but be shocked by David's response. He doesn't crave vengeance. He doesn't cry out first for protection or justice. No, David's first thoughts run to the temple, where the Lord dwells. The first desire of his heart is to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. At first look, this response seems almost shockingly unnatural, that is, until you let Psalm 27 teach you about faith, safety, and the presence of the Lord.

2) *Its regularity.* For all of its seeming shock value, Psalm 27 gives an accurate and familiar picture of what normal life is like in a fallen world. A moment of high worship is followed by a situation of trouble. A moment of insight is followed by a moment of confusion. Rest is followed by threat. Call to action is followed by the need to wait. Confidence that God is near is followed by a desperate plea that he would hear and answer. These are the variegated colors of a world in need of restoration. These are the regular ups and downs, ins and outs, and highs and lows of living with the Lord in a place

that is broken. When you read this psalm, you get the impression that David lived where we live.

3) *Its focus on Christ.* Underneath the psalm's accurate depiction of the here-and-there experiences of the world we all live in is a deeper theme. This theme is really the unifying theme of the psalm. It is the thing that gives this psalm of trouble and faith its hope. What is this theme? It is Christ. All of the fingers of this psalm point to Christ. Jesus came to earth, knowing the trouble he would face, but he was not afraid; he knew his Father would be his light and salvation. Jesus knew that his enemies would stumble and fall.

In the cross's most dramatic moment, it was Jesus who cried for his Father not to turn away in anger. It was Jesus who said he would not be alone, even though his father and mother would forsake him. Jesus faced the false witnesses who were intent on violence. Beneath everything else, this is a psalm of sin and redemption, and because of that, again and again it points us to the Redeemer who will come to suffer injustice, violence, and ultimately the rejection of his Father so that we might know forgiveness, acceptance, life, and hope.

4) *Its call to patient hope.* This is not a cynical, survivalist psalm. It does not have an "I've been taken once and it won't happen again" feel to it. For all of the trouble that courses its way through this psalm, it is in the end a psalm of bright and lasting hope. It doesn't call us to live self-protectively. It doesn't give us seven steps for avoiding the difficulties of the fallen world.

No, Psalm 27 tells that even in the middle of difficulties that we do not understand nor seem able to escape, we have reason to take heart and have hope. And the hope of Psalm 27 is not like the hope of a child who has just been promised ice cream in a few hours. The child *does* hope that the ice cream will actually materialize, and she believes it will because she believes that her parents really love her. But she will come back every five minutes to ask you if it's time for ice cream yet! The hope of Psalm 27 is patient, and it grows stronger as it waits, because it is rooted in a daily consideration of the goodness of the Lord.

This really does speak into the familiar realities of your life and mine with challenge and hope, with conviction and encouragement, and with honesty and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me say a little bit about the fifty-two meditations that you will be reading. You are not holding an exegetical commentary on Psalm 27. I have approached the psalm like a wood butcher. The wood butcher cuts into a log, looking for boards with a particularly interesting or elegant grain, and cuts them out like a meat butcher would do with a fine steak. Then he places them next to other boards of similar beauty and assembles them into a table, a chair, or a fine wooden box. He assembles the pieces intentionally to help others see their individual and collective beauty in a way they wouldn't without his eyes and his hands.

I have cut into the log of Psalm 27 and pulled out themes of interesting and elegant grain and assembled them into a picture of how to live with hope in God in a world that is fallen. No two of these reflections are exactly alike. Each has a different grain, yet each is meant to catch your attention and help you to see. My hope is that as you examine the variegated grains of truth that are in this psalm, you will not settle for self-protection or survival. My hope is that these reflections will fill your heart with a patient hope that grows stronger as the trouble-spotted days go by.

Psalm 27 and Everyday Life

Psalm 27 really is an amazing psalm. There are moments when it soars with the thoughts of what it means to be a child of the Lord. There are places where it reaches into the harshest realities of life in a very broken world. There are times when this psalm is a scalpel, cutting through the layers and exposing the heart. It is a psalm of worship, commitment, trouble, beauty, and patience. There is a way in which Psalm 27 is like a biblical worldview presented as a podcast. There simply is much more there than you think there is after your first reading.

I had a friend who had quite a large rose garden. He was very dedicated to doing all the daily tasks necessary to keep his roses healthy. But it hit him one day that he'd taken no time to actually enjoy the roses that he was so zealous to tend. So one afternoon he did just that. He sat down in front of one of his rose bushes for three hours. As he sat, he began to see, smell, and hear things that he wouldn't have experienced any other way. Contrary to what you

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may think, the time didn't drag on. He was enthralled by the created glory that he was taking in. And as he sat there, he began to realize why those bushes were worth the commitment and the effort that he'd been investing.

But there's more. After his three-hour gaze of that one bush, he would never—could never—look at roses as he once did. That afternoon he saw, really saw, what a rose was about, and new sight changed him. So, I'm inviting you to sit down with me in front of Psalm 27. I'm inviting you to keep your eyes focused and your ears tuned. I'm inviting you to open your heart to what you may have been too busy to see. I'm inviting you to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. And I would imagine that if you are willing to do that, like my friend, somehow, someday, you'll get up a changed person.

Paul David Tripp
March 6, 2008

8 | What Is Your One Thing?

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

PSALM 27:4

It's an incredible statement, one that I'm not sure I could honestly make. It's made even more powerful when you realize that it was written by a man who is under attack. His "one thing" isn't safety, or vindication, or victory. His one thing isn't power, control, or retribution. No, even under personal duress, the one thing that David wishes for is to be in God's house taking in the grandeur and glory of the beauty of the Lord. This desire was designed to be the central motivating desire of every person created by God and made in his image. And yet, on this side of the garden, it seems a statement that could only ever be made by a deeply devout human being.

It does beg the question, "What's your one thing?" What is the one thing that your heart craves? What is the one thing that you think would change your life? What is the one thing that you look to for satisfaction, contentment, or peace? What is the one thing that you mourn having to live without? What is the one thing that fills your daydreams and commands your sleepy meditations? What is your one thing?

The spiritual reality for many of us is that the one thing is not the Lord. And the danger in that reality is this: your one thing will control your heart, and whatever controls your heart will exercise inescapable influence over your words, choices, and actions. Your one thing will become that which shapes and directs your responses

What Is Your One Thing?

to the situations and relationships of your daily life. If the Lord isn't your one thing, the thing that is your one thing will be your functional lord.

Here is what you say to yourself when something is your one thing: "Life has meaning and I have worth only if I have _____ in my life." The problem is that the one-thing catalog¹ is virtually endless:

- *Power.* Life has meaning or I have worth only if I have power and influence over others.
- *Approval.* If I am loved and respected by _____.
- *Comfort.* If I have a certain kind of pleasure or experience.
- *Image.* If I have a certain look or body image.
- *Control.* If I am able to have mastery over a particular area of my life.
- *Dependence.* If someone is there to keep me safe.
- *Independence.* If I am completely free of the obligation or responsibility to take care of someone.
- *Inclusion:* If a particular social or professional group lets me into their inner ring.
- *Achievement.* If I am recognized for my accomplishments.
- *Prosperity.* If I have a certain level of wealth, finance, nice possessions.
- *Work.* If I am highly productive and get a lot done.
- *Religion.* If I am adhering to my religion's codes and accomplished in its activities.
- *Irreligion.* If I am totally independent of organized religion and have a self-made morality.
- *Race or culture.* If my race and culture are ascendant and recognized as superior.
- *A person.* If this one person is happy to be in my life and happy with me.
- *Family.* If my children/parents are happy and happy with me.
- *Helping.* If people are dependent on me and need me.
- *Suffering.* If I am hurting or having a problem, only then do I feel noble, worthy of love, or free of guilt.

You see, in every situation and relationship of your everyday life, there is a one-thing war being fought on the turf of your heart. You and I are safe only when the Lord really is the one thing that commands our hearts and controls our actions. Yet there are many things that compete with him as the one thing that your heart craves.

¹List adapted from Hannibal Silver (doctor of ministry project, Westminster Theological Seminary)

a shelter in the time of storm

Where are you looking for meaning and worth? What is the beauty that you wish you had in your life? What is your one thing?

Take a Moment

1. Look at the one-thing catalog. Which of these has tended to hook you? How has that shaped what you do and say?
2. Where do you see a daily war taking place for the control of your heart?

14 | You're Talking to Yourself

My heart says to you,
"Your face, LORD, do I seek."

PSALM 27:8

I find myself saying it all the time. When people hear it they laugh, but actually I'm being quite serious when I say it. Here it is: no one is more influential in your life than you are, because no one talks to you more than you do. You are in an unending conversation with yourself. You are talking to yourself all the time, interpreting, organizing, and analyzing what's going on inside you and around you.

You may be talking to yourself about why you feel so tired. Or maybe you woke up this morning with a sense of dread and you are not sure why. Perhaps you were surprised by how angry you got at the remark of that coworker. Or maybe you are rehearsing to yourself your schedule for the day, wondering why you agree to so many things in one day. Perhaps you are reliving a conversation that didn't go too well. Or maybe you are preparing yourself for a conversation that may be difficult, conjuring up as many renditions as you can imagine so you can cover all the contingencies. Maybe your mind has traveled back to your distant past and, for reasons you don't understand, you are recalling events from your early childhood. Or maybe you are simply telling yourself to buck up, slow down, hang in there, or take charge.

The point is that you are constantly involved in an internal conversation that greatly influences the things you decide, say, and do. In Psalm 27, David lets us eavesdrop on his internal conversation. He is exhorting himself, in the midst of his trouble, not to run away from God but to run toward him. Now that's good self-counsel!

What do you regularly tell yourself about yourself, God, and your circumstances? Do your words to yourself encourage faith, hope,

and courage? Or do they stimulate doubt, discouragement, and fear? Do you remind yourself that God is near, or do you reason within yourself, given your circumstances, that he must be distant? Do you encourage yourself to run to God even when you don't understand what he is doing? Or do you give yourself permission to back away from him when you are confused by the seeming distance between what he has promised and what you are experiencing? Are you your own best defense lawyer, laying out arguments for your innocence in places where you are actually guilty? When others talk to you, is your internal conversation so loud that it's hard to concentrate on what they are saying?

Here's the question: how wholesome, faith-driven, and Christ-centered is the conversation that you have with yourself every day? Do you remind yourself of your need? Do you point yourself, once again, to the beauty and practicality of God's grace? Do you tell yourself to run toward him in those moments when you feel like running from him? Would you be comfortable with someone's playing a public recording of the private conversation you have with yourself every day?

No one is more influential in your life than you are, because no one talks to you more than you do. How well are you counseling yourself? Reach out for help one more time today. Confess that you don't counsel yourself very well, and rest in the rescuing grace of the One who is called Wonderful Counselor.

Take a Moment

1. What are the things that you regularly say to yourself that shape the decisions you make, the actions you take, and the words you say?
2. What are some of the truths from Psalm 27 that you can call to mind as you talk to yourself?