

Introduction:

A. Illus.: Do you know Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"? It is set about 200 years ago. The main character is a gangly schoolmaster named Ichabod Crane who looked like "some scarecrow eloped from a cornfield." He loved reading, hearing and telling scary stories, and he had settled in the right place for that, because Sleepy Hollow had a story they all swore was true, about a headless horseman, a Hessian soldier decapitated by a cannonball, who rode out of the church graveyard at night.

One night, Ichabod Crane had gone a-courting, visiting the home of the girl he wanted to win, and the evening had been spent, romantically, in telling dark and scary tales. On top of that, she dumped him. Then, with the night as dark and dismal as his emotions, he had to pass through Sleepy Hollow! He was already completely creeped out by the dark shadows and creaking branches when he saw... the headless horseman, silent and waiting. Irving writes, "*He cudgelled the sides of [his horse,] the inflexible Gunpowder, and, shutting his eyes, broke forth with involuntary fervor into a psalm tune. Just then the shadowy object of alarm put itself in motion, and, with a scramble and a bound, stood at once in the middle of the road... [Ichabod's] heart began to sink within him; he endeavored to resume his psalm tune, but his parched tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he could not utter a stave.*"

B. What do you do when you're scared? If you want to know what happened to Ichabod Crane you'll have to read the story, but what caught my attention was that terrified man trying to sing a psalm from the Bible. He had the right idea, you know. Psalms really are suited for frightening times. I bring this up today because a new year is hard upon us, and while I don't know about you, I admit that for me I always face a new year with a bit of apprehension. Not fear, but a sober sense that the year ahead will surely have its fears and sorrows. The way a Christian stocks up for hard times ahead is by learning to pray, and no place teaches us how to pray so well as the psalms. So for the year ahead I suggest we put a bookmark at **Ps. 27**. Turn there with me.

Vv.1-6... These verses seem to be the prayer of Supersaint. I mean, how many Christians do you know, even among the strongest, who can say with v.3, "*tho' war break out against me, even then will I be confident*"? Fact is, the later verses, to say nothing of other psalms, show that David didn't always have this kind of spiritual bravado. **I don't think he prayed these things because he felt them, but because he knew they were true.**

I. WHEN YOU PRAY IN SCARY TIMES, MARSHAL YOUR GOD-GIVEN CERTAINTIES (27:1-6)

Pray what we *know*, even if it's not what we *feel*.

A. **Certainty:** Your enemies are no match for your God (v.1-3). I think David started his prayer time thinking, "*What do I know about God that should give me confidence in this scary time?*" He gravitated to three qualities of God that anxious people need to hang on to:

1. "The LORD is my light". Scary times are like Sleepy Hollow at midnight. Mere shadows frighten us; branches squeaking together make us shake. We lay there in our dark bedroom playing mental videos of what *might* happen. But **knowing** that the LORD is near me banishes the shadows, and reveals the truth about the road before me. We look around in the bright light of the Lord's company and ask, "*whom shall I fear?*"
2. "The LORD is my salvation". We know full well that God saves us from sin, but sin isn't what really frightens us. What scares the wits out of us is the letter from the IRS, or the rumors of lay-offs, or the bully, or spending Christmas with your sister. But the Lord is our salvation from *all* that threatens us. It isn't that bad things won't happen to us, but that when bad things happen it is well with our souls.

Illus.: I love the story about the time the Papal envoy threatened Martin Luther with all kinds of terrible things that would happen if he didn't renounce his teachings. He threatened that, in the end, even Luther's supporters would desert him. "*Where will you be then?*" asked the envoy. "*Then as now,*" Luther answered, "*in the hands of God.*" [#1646] David's thought exactly.

3. "The LORD is the stronghold of my life". Picture the one of those deep mountain bunkers, or a castle, and you deep within. That's you in God. The NT says again and again that we are "in Christ" and

not even a besieging army nor the fury of a war can touch us when we are hidden in God. *“Of whom shall I be afraid?”*

After thinking about his God, David decides that it is his enemies who are in danger—*“they will stumble and fall.”* So what do we learn here from this prayer? **Pray the certainties of God’s might and love till you know that your enemies are no match for your God.** This takes time, in my experience. I need to read Scripture to get a focus on God again, and I may need to repeat this process and prayer as the fears re-emerge.

- B. **Certainty:** Nothing is more important than focusing on God (v.4). Here’s Supersaint again. I have trouble relating to this—wanting to spend all my time, day and night, just being in God’s presence, especially when his world was crashing in on him. But David knew that for his heart’s sake, when trouble was swirling all around him, there was nothing so healthy as focusing on God’s beauty. That is still true and we **have an advantage over David because we know Jesus Christ.** We see God’s beauty best in Jesus, and we see Jesus in the Bible’s symbols and stories, in prophecies and promises, in the Gospels and the New Testament letters, and in the stirring vision of Revelation. Doing this when we’re in trouble is not only comforting, it is a place of safety. **Vv.5-6** explain *why* gazing on the beauty of the Lord is so important...
- C. **Certainty:** Being close to God is the secret of safety and victory (vv.5-6). Situating ourselves near God in worship and prayer—gazing on the beauty of the Lord and seeking him in his Temple—is like **pulling a protective shield** around ourselves, so that we are utterly safe from our enemies. But dwelling in God’s presence also **energizes** us; it makes us stronger than our enemies. Our souls take on fresh strength in God’s presence. There, gazing on the Lord’s beauty, we’re restored to **joy**; we can sing again, *“You may have all this world, but give me Jesus.”* And, as Nehemiah said, *“the joy of the Lord is your strength.”* Nothing around us may change, but when we pray our way into this heart-set, as David did, we will find ourselves strong and confident in God and joyful

SUMMARY: A statement that sustained me when I was overwhelmed with depression was, **do not doubt in the darkness what you knew to be true in the light.** This part of praying affirms the certainties we knew to be true in the light. Read the Bible and lift the promises up to God in prayer. Sing the songs that celebrate our certainties. Patiently tune your heart to the pitch of the psalmist’s prayer till you grow calm.

The tone in the next part of his prayer changes dramatically. **Vv.7-12...** I picture David on his knees, head pushed to the floor, fists against his temples, and a catch in his throat. He is afraid. But **he is not afraid of his enemies. He is afraid of going forward without God.** His prayer is a desperate cry to lay hold of God with the very real fear that God might have no more patience for him.

II. WHEN YOU PRAY IN SCARY TIMES, CRY OUT FOR GOD’S MERCY (27:7-12)

Lots of times when we’re in trouble, we wonder if God might not be thinking, *“You got yourself into this, now you get yourself out.”* Or, *“Sure, you come to me now that you’re in trouble but where were you when I was blessing you?”* I get the impression that David did not consider God’s help a sure bet, either. There seem to be two parts of his prayer:

- A. Lay hold of God’s mercy (vv.7-10). David realizes that God does not *owe* him a hearing, that God may have a reason to be angry with this servant, that God might well want to look the other way. Do you know that feeling? I love **v.8** where he says, *“I know what I need to do—seek God—so that’s what I’m doing!”* He not only asks for mercy but he remembers that God has been his strength in the past: *“you have been my helper... O God my Savior... the LORD will receive me.”* **In short, he not only asks for God’s mercy, he believes he will have it.** We must pray ourselves through that same process. Then, having sought God’s mercy...
- B. Pray to know the righteous path (vv.11-12). Again, notice he doesn’t ask God to wipe out the enemy or to make the world go away. He prays that God would help him find a straight path—a righteous way to walk through the trouble he was facing. David knew right from wrong like you do, but when there are “oppressors,” “foes” and “false witnesses” dogging your every step, it is easy to be confused over how to live righteously. For example, it is easy to react in anger rather than to act righteously. It is easy to run in fear, or grow bitter, or to try to escape in some quick-fix pleasure. So we pray that God would help us

walk through this mess without sinning, to not succumb to the oppressors and accusers, but to do, day by day, what is right. Do you think to pray that way when you have to face a threatening person? Our tendency is to pray, “*Lord, make her stop.*” Or “*Lord, get me out of here.*” But a better prayer is, “*Lord, teach me your way through this. Show me how to walk through this dark hollow like a saint.*”

SUMMARY: So in desperate times, pray for God’s merciful attention and pray to know the righteous path through what you’re facing. “*Lord, in this hard thing, help me not to sin, for if I sin will fall right into the hands of my enemies.*”

Now the last two verses are a kind of grand finale, a coda, to this sung prayer: **vv.13-14...**

III. WHEN YOU PRAY LIKE THIS IN SCARY TIMES, YOU WILL SEE RESULTS (27:13-14)

What we would expect from a prayer in the midst of enemies, a God-given prayer for frightening times, is that God would answer by driving the headless horseman away, that God would whup our enemies, and leave them yelping in the ditch. But actually, David receives two surprising answers:

- A. **God gives us fresh confidence that he is not done being good to us (v.13).** Remember that great line in Ps. 23, “*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*” It may be that God will shoo away your enemy, or resolve the frightening situation. He certainly does that. But it may be that, there in God’s fortress, he will throw you a banquet while the enemy lays a vain siege outside God’s walls, that they will look in the window of what they thought was a prison and find that you are dining on the Bread of life and being toasted by the King. But whatever he does, you will know when you’ve prayed well that God is not done being good to you.
- B. **We will have renewed courage to wait for God to act (v.14).** There is nothing we hate so much in frightening times as waiting. But God is in the waiting. **Richard Foster** wrote, “*Please, for God’s sake and your own, don’t just do something, stand there!*” Waiting for the Lord is, of course, no easy matter. In fact, I don’t think you can wait this way unless you’ve prayed this prayer. David gives us this advice because he prayed himself to this place. You bow your head to pray, just like David did, filled with fear, your heart racing, time dragging, trouble pressing in hard. But I promise, if you patiently work through this prayer, if we pause again and again to tune our heart’s strings to its pitch, we will finally raise our heads, confident of seeing God’s goodness, and emboldened to wait on God because we know he will care for us no matter what happens.

Conclusion

This is not a passage simply to be analyzed. It is a prayer to be prayed. God answers prayers like this. Always. Every time. He never answers with a ‘no’. It isn’t enough for Christians to pray. Even pagans pray. We need to pray *right*. And the psalms—this psalm—teach us how to do it.

In his book, *The Unchained Soul*, **Calvin Miller** relates to Ichabod Crane,

“There was a grove of locust trees in our semirural section of the city. To be coming home from a wolf-man movie and to pass through that grove of trees when the moon was full was a fearsome passage of life. It was always an occasion for loud whistling—that kind of breathy whistling that drives away the night-stalkers. In the woods I listened for footfalls in the dry grass. Fear grew! Things too horrible to define stalked my insecurity. Imaginary felt-footed creatures followed me home from many a movie. But whenever I no longer found the ‘spit’ to whistle, I traded my childish fears on the one thing children do best—prayer! I know now what Ray Stedman wrote: ‘Prayer is the cry of a beloved child to his father, and frequently it is the cry of a child who is lost in dark woods, with noises in the brush—strange frightening noises.’ Prayer for children is light in darkness.”

“Samuel Chadwick wrote, ‘The one concern of the Devil is to keep the Saints from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless study, prayerless work, prayerless religion...but he trembles when we pray... The hymnist William Cowper sang...

*Restraining prayer, we cease to fight;
Prayer makes the Christ’s armor bright,
And Satan trembles when he sees,*

The weakest Saint upon his knees." [p.27,28]