

The Approval Trap

The Fear of God for You

August 24, 2025

Psalm 27

Pastoral Prayer

Adoration (*Joshua 2:11; Job 26:7; Amos 5:8*)

Almighty God, You reign above all things—heaven and earth are Yours. You hold creation together by Your power, suspending the earth in place and directing the stars in their courses. The rising of the sun and the turning of night to day are in Your hands. You pour out the seas and command the skies. You are the Maker of all, and there is none like You.

Confession (*Numbers 14:17–18; Acts 19:17; Romans 12:1*)

And that includes us. We are not like you. In fact, we often try to replace you. You are patient and rich in compassion, yet we often run to pride, selfishness, and rebellion. Forgive us for the ways we have turned from Your ways. Wash us clean by Your grace. Search us, Spirit of God, and reveal what we have tried to hide. We lay down our failures and guilt at Your feet, trusting in Your mercy that never fails.

Supplication (*Leviticus 19:15; Isaiah 33:2; Proverbs 3:13–18; Proverbs 4:7–8*)

Lord, we ask You to strengthen us for the battles we face. Guard us from the schemes of the evil one, from the weakness of our own flesh, and from the pressures of this world. Shape our character to reflect Christ, grow us in wisdom and discipline, and grant us health and strength to serve You. Bless the work of our hands this week. We also lift up the needs of others: the poor, the hungry, the persecuted, and those in authority. Bring peace among the nations, justice to the oppressed, and hope to the weary. Be near to all who suffer, and use us as vessels of Your compassion.

Closing (*John 6:68–69; John 11:25–26*)

Lord Jesus, we cling to You, for You alone have the words of life. You are the Holy One, the resurrection and the life, the One who gives eternal hope to all who believe. Keep our eyes fixed on You, that we might walk in Your ways until faith becomes sight. Amen.

Introduction

Let's have a quick review before we jump into Psalm 27 together. We've essentially been expositing Proverbs 29:25 – *The fear of man is a snare, but those who trust in the Lord are protected.*

In the first message, we learned what fear of man is and why we have it, and how it impacts our lives. (SLIDE)

- ***The fear of man is when other people's approval, opinions, or threats matter more to us than God, which traps us in insecurity, rejection, and anxiety. We live enslaved to their control.***

I've tried to share a variety of ways this manifests itself in our lives, and one of our members shared with me about how this applies when we receive criticism. If people are big and God is small in our hearts, when we receive criticism from others, we have a variety of unhealthy responses. (SLIDE)

- ***We run from it or ignore it***
- ***We become suspicious of it or the person giving it***
- ***We lash out at the person giving it***
- ***We make excuses***
- ***We break down in tears***

But if God is bigger in our hearts than others, we can receive it, learn from it, and become all the better for it. ***Keep this in mind when you get your first paper back this semester or have your performance review this year!***

In last week's message, we learned the remedy: the fear of God. We talked about what the fear of God is, and how to cultivate it in our lives. (SLIDE)

- ***The fear of God is living in awe-filled trust of His holiness, love, and authority, making Him bigger than people in our hearts. It grows as we worship, obey, and remember the gospel, which frees us to need people less and love them more.***

So with those two things behind us, here is where we are going today and next week. Today I want to unpack how growing in the fear of the Lord frees us to need people less. Next week, I want to talk about how growing in the fear of the Lord helps us love people more.

Body

So, how does the fear of the Lord free us to need people less? We get a picture of this in Psalm 27. A thorough examination of Psalm 27 reveals what it looks like to be growing in our fear of the Lord and how that frees us from needing other people ... frees us from the fear of man.

David's Beliefs

Notice first what David knows about God. Reading through the Psalm, we learn a lot about the nature or character of God. (SLIDE)

David refers to God as his light ... his salvation ... his stronghold **in v. 1.**

- “Light” means that God is our life, our purity, our holiness, and our hope.
- “Salvation” means that God is our rescuer or our victor.

In verse 4, David tells us that God is beautiful, meaning that God is pleasant and delightful.

In verses 7 and 8, David tells us that God is a gracious helper, bent toward compassion and assistance toward us.

These are all attributes that David came to understand about God through his own study of the Law and his own experiences, but on our side of redemptive history, we see all of these things to be true most clearly in Jesus.

- Jesus is our light—He said, “I am the light of the world,” driving back the darkness of sin and confusion with His holiness and truth.
- He is our salvation—the rescuer who entered our battle, bore our punishment, and rose victorious over sin and death.
- He is our stronghold—the fortress that cannot be shaken, where no condemnation and no enemy can ultimately reach us.
- And when David calls God “beautiful,” we see that beauty most fully in the face of Christ—His mercy, His wisdom, His gentleness, His sacrifice—all together drawing our hearts to worship.
- When David calls out to a God who is gracious and ready to help, we see that answered in Jesus, who welcomes the weary and promises never to cast out those who come to Him.

So the same things that David believed about God before Jesus, we now believe about God because they found their fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus. And if they are true (and they are), then that defines our lives. It doesn’t just impact our lives. It **DEFINES** our lives.

David’s Response

In light of knowing and believing these things about God, notice what David did. He states it explicitly in v. 4, then elaborates through the rest of the Psalm. Look at verse. 4. **(SLIDE)**

I have asked one thing from the LORD; it is what I desire: to dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, gazing on the beauty of the LORD and seeking him in his temple.

Dwelling is Gazing and Seeking

Dwelling

When David comes to know God for who He is, he wants to dwell with God, and dwelling looks like two things: gazing and seeking. In one word, he **fears** Him. But the dwelling, gazing, and seeking are really helpful for describing what this looks like.

When David says that he desires to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of his life, he doesn't mean that literally or physically. The idea reminds me of an ad I've seen multiple times for Capital One Bank in which clients visit a physical location and bump into "the Capital One Bank" guy. They take a "groupie" with him and ask, "So, what do you do when you're not at the bank?" Turns out he lives there: sleeping on the lobby furniture, watering the plants, etc. He literally "dwells" in the bank all of his life.

That's not what David means here. Only the Levites could do that anyway. Remember: it's a psalm ... a poem ... a prayer ... a song lyric. What he is actually asking for is to **experience the unbroken presence of God**. He states this with great strength and clarity in verse 8. (SLIDE)

My heart says this about you: "Seek his face." LORD, I will seek your face.

That image, perhaps more than any word study, tells us everything we need to know about what dwelling with God looks like. We might use the phrase, "getting up close and personal" to describe the same thing David is describing here. What David is after here is, "I don't want to know you distantly. I don't want to obey you in a general way. I don't want to have a kind of general inspirational belief in you. I want to know you personally and intimately."

Knowing who God is and what He's done doesn't lead us to a casual relationship with Him. When you truly understand who God is, what He's like, and what He's done, you don't keep Him on the margins. You don't nod politely to the King of kings on Sunday and then ignore Him the rest of the week. David truly saw who God was and sought after the unbroken presence of God.

And this dwelling happens two ways for David, and two ways for us: gazing and seeking. To want to dwell in the house of the Lord forever means gazing on God and seeking God.

Gazing

David says in v. 4 that he wanted to be "gazing on the beauty of the Lord." You know what it means to gaze on the beauty of something. You turn it over in your imagination, the thing you want. It may be a career. It may be a house at the beach. It may be a particular person, and you think what life will be like if you get it. You gaze on the beauty of it. See? You fill your mind with it. You taste it. You rest in it. To put it in Proverbs 29 terms, **you fear it**. You revere it. You worship it. That's what David is calling on us to when we know what God is really like. Gaze on his beauty. Do you know how to do that? Do you take time to do that? David says unless you do that, you'll not be dwelling in his house and you'll have a fearful life.

Seeking

In v. 4, he doesn't just say, "I want to gaze on your beauty," but, "I want to seek him." Now the word seek is a very, very specific Hebrew word. It means to go and get counsel. So what David is saying here is, "When I come to you, I am trying to find out what your will is, Oh Lord." He wants to obey. He wants to find out God's will, and he wants to submit to it.

People who fear God can't live selfishly (seeking our own approval) or enslaved to other (caught in the approval trap). ***To know Him truly is to realize that His majesty demands our reverence, His mercy demands our gratitude, and His love demands our whole lives.*** David truly saw who God was and sought to do what God wanted Him to do and be who God wanted Him to be. **That's the fear of God.**

David's Life

What resulted in David's life as a result of his fear of God?

The answer is stated in principle in verse 1 and there are specific examples throughout the Psalm, particularly in vv. 2-3, and 10. (SLIDE)

1 ... Whom should I fear? ... Whom should I dread? (that's the principle, no fear of man)

2 When evildoers came against me to devour my flesh, my foes and my enemies stumbled and fell.

3 Though an army deploys against me, my heart will not be afraid; though a war breaks out against me, I will still be confident.

10 Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD cares for me.

Notice what David is doing in these passages. He is naming and visualizing the worst possible things that could have happened to him, pressing them up against who God is, and concluding that even if the worst possible scenario occurred, he would still be victorious ... still be confident ... still be loved. Shame. Rejection. Harm. They are all in Psalm 27.

Let's quickly focus on v. 10. (SLIDE) ***Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD cares for me.***

There is, of course, nothing wrong with a child longing for the love of their parents. God created and commanded that love, and for us to desire it is natural and good. But as we all know, our parents fail us. Just ask my kids. They have stories of my love coming up quite short. Human love often fails. This is that "rejection" or "harm" that we talked about in the first week of the series.

And if you were counseling a child or adult who had been abandoned by his or her parents, you might hear them say things like, “I’ll never get over what they did. I’ll never be OK. I’ll always be broken. There will always be something really important missing in my life. It’s inevitable that I’ll hurt other people the same way.” And what we’ve learned in this series is that such talk is FEAR OF MAN talk. Such a person is still trying to get their parents approval. A good thing (parental love) has become a god thing, and that can only create a mountain of anxiety and other mental health issues.

David points us to a better anchor: *“The Lord cares for me.”* That’s the gospel answer. When every earthly relationship or treasure fails, the Lord does not. When others reject you, He receives you. That means you don’t have to worship the love of parents, or a spouse, or a career, or image or sorority sisters or fraternity brothers, or anything else as your “one thing.” Fix your gaze instead on the beauty of the Lord ... FEAR THE LORD ... and you will find the only love that never forsakes, the only acceptance that never ends.

That’s the power of the fear of the Lord. That’s how we get out and stay out of the approval trap. ***When God is bigger than people in our hearts, and that fear grows as we worship, obey, and remember the gospel, we are freed to need people less and love them more.***

Conclusion/Application

To close this morning’s message, I want to give you two things to work on ... two points of application, as it were, so that you can grow in the fear of the Lord.

Follow Anxiety’s Trail

The first thing we can do with today’s text to help us grow in the fear of the Lord is (slide) **follow anxiety’s trail** so that you can see who or what it is that you are really feeling.

Strong or debilitating anxiety leaves a trail. Anxiety is a gauge. More often than not, a strong or devastating kind of anxiety is the result of the fear of man. We are “gazing and seeking” on the beauty of something and making that the thing you worship the most ... the thing that will complete you or make you happy in that moment. So, the anxiety we feel is, in that sense, a real gift from God to us. It’s the way He’s made us so that we can see where we are caught in the approval trap.

Illustration

One pastor friend of mine was really struggling with having hard conversations with his staff and members of his church, so much so that he did all that he could to avoid having them and tried to please everyone that approached him with a complaint. It wrecked his mental health. He went to see a counselor who was also a devout Christian man, and the counselor walked him through an exercise in which he traced back his anxiety with hard conversations to the fact that he had never had any hard conversations with his parents who had essentially abandoned him in high

school. So, following the trail of our anxieties has a way of revealing who we are fearing or worshipping.

Cultivate the Fear of the Lord

The second thing we need to do is simply set it in our minds that we must (SLIDE) **cultivate the fear of the Lord in our lives**. I said last week that we can't microwave our spiritual growth. Growing in the fear of the Lord is more like farming. There are disciplines to seeking his will. You read the Bible. You pray. You meditate. You take the sacraments at church. Those are the inner disciplines. Then you have the outer disciplines. Be simple in your lifestyle instead of lavish. Be chaste in your lifestyle instead of impure. Be forgiving in your lifestyle instead of bitter. Have a servant heart instead of an ambitious and selfish heart. These are disciplines. Obey, seek him, and you'll gaze on his beauty. Otherwise, you'll step right back in the approval trap.

You can drive down to Barnes and Noble and pick up all kinds of books that will help you change your behavior or help you replace your negative thoughts with positive ones. All are band-aids ... those cheap ones from Dollar General that fall off in a couple of hours b/c the adhesive is terrible.

That's not what God offers. No patches. No band-aids. ANTIDOTE. Regeneration. A new heart. A new way of life. A new way of doing everything. Which takes time and patience and discipline to see come to fruition. It is, as Eugene Peterson puts it, "a long obedience in the same direction." I invite you to take that first step today (SLIDE – **faith/baptism/etc.**).

Closing Prayer

Lord, You are our light and our salvation—whom shall we fear? You are the stronghold of our lives—of whom shall we be afraid? We thank You that even when enemies rise, when rejection comes, or when trials surround us, we can be confident because You are with us. Give us hearts that seek Your face above all else, and help us dwell in Your presence with courage and joy. Send us out today trusting not in ourselves, nor in the approval of others, but resting securely in You, our refuge and our strength. In Jesus' name, Amen.