

Psalms 56:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.

Analysis

What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee. This brief yet profound declaration captures the essence of biblical faith—not the absence of fear but the choice to trust God in the midst of fear. The verse appears in a psalm written during one of David's most desperate moments, when captured by Philistine enemies in Gath (1 Samuel 21:10-15).

"What time" (נִיּוֹם/yom)—literally "in the day" or "at the time"—establishes temporal specificity. David doesn't speak theoretically about hypothetical future fear but acknowledges present, concrete reality. The construction assumes fear will come; the question is how believers respond when it does. This realistic assessment of human experience validates our emotional struggles while pointing beyond them.

"I am afraid" (אֶירָא/ira) uses the verb יָרָא (yare), meaning to fear, be terrified, be anxious. This is the same verb used for fearing God (reverential awe) but here describes human dread of danger. David doesn't pretend invulnerability or deny legitimate fear. He was surrounded by enemies who sought his life (v. 1-2); fear was the rational response. Biblical faith doesn't require pretending fears don't exist or manufacturing false confidence.

The honesty here is theologically crucial. Scripture never presents faith as the suppression of emotions or denial of reality. The psalms especially give voice to authentic human experience—fear, anger, confusion, despair. David models emotional integrity before God, acknowledging fear rather than masking it with religious platitudes.

"I will trust" (נִבְטַח/ebtach) employs the imperfect tense suggesting ongoing, continuous action—"I will keep trusting" or "I will choose to trust." The verb נִבְטַח (batach) means to trust, rely upon, be confident in. It conveys the idea of leaning one's full weight on something, finding security and stability in it. This is volitional commitment, not passive resignation.

The contrast structure is vital: "when I am afraid" acknowledges emotion; "I will trust" declares volition. Fear is feeling; trust is faith-based choice. David doesn't wait for fear to dissipate before trusting; he chooses trust in the presence of fear. This is mature faith—not the absence of fear but the subordination of fear to trust in God's character and promises.

"In thee" (בָּךְ/bak) specifies the object of trust—not in oneself, one's resources, or other people, but in God Himself. The pronoun refers to Yahweh, the covenant God who has proven faithful. Trust finds its proper object in God's character (His power, wisdom, faithfulness, love) and His promises (to never leave or forsake His people, to work all things for their good, to preserve them eternally).

Theologically, this verse addresses the relationship between faith and feelings. Faith is not the absence of negative emotions but the choice to trust God's truth despite emotions. Fear may be present, but it need not be dominant. Believers live in the tension of feeling fear while choosing faith—a tension that persists until glorification removes all capacity for fear.

Historical Context

The superscription identifies the historical context: "when the Philistines took him in Gath" (בְּגֵת אֶתוֹ פָּלִשְׁתִּים לָקְחוּ/בְּגֵת אֶתוֹ פָּלִשְׁתִּים לָקְחוּ/miktam ledavid be'ehoz oto felishtim begat). This refers to the incident recorded in 1 Samuel 21:10-15, a low point in David's fugitive years fleeing from King Saul.

After fleeing from Saul, David came to Gath, the Philistine city ruled by King Achish—ironically, the hometown of Goliath, whom David had killed years earlier (1 Samuel 17). The servants of Achish recognized David: "Is not this David the king of the land? Did they not sing one to another of him in dances, saying, Saul hath

slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands?" (1 Samuel 21:11).

Realizing his peril—a wanted fugitive recognized by Israel's historic enemies—David "was sore afraid of Achish the king of Gath" (1 Samuel 21:12). To escape execution, he feigned insanity, scratching on doors and drooling into his beard (1 Samuel 21:13). Achish, convinced of David's madness, dismissed him. The strategy worked, but David's fear was profound and genuine.

This context illuminates Psalm 56:3. David wasn't writing from safety and comfort but from immediate, life-threatening danger. His fear had reasonable grounds—he was surrounded by enemies who had every motive to kill him. Yet in this desperate moment, he chose trust over terror, faith over panic.

First-millennium BC Near Eastern culture emphasized honor, strength, and courage. Admitting fear, especially for a warrior-king like David, could be seen as weakness. Yet David's vulnerability in the psalms reveals a profound understanding: true strength isn't denying fear but trusting God through fear. This counter-cultural honesty made David "a man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22).

The psalm's structure alternates between describing enemies (vv. 1-2, 5-6) and declaring trust in God (vv. 3-4, 10-11). Verse 3 introduces the trust theme that becomes the psalm's refrain: "In God I have put my trust; I will not fear: what can flesh do unto me?" (v. 4). The repetition emphasizes that trust must be repeatedly chosen, especially when circumstances remain threatening.

For early Christians facing persecution, this psalm provided immense comfort. When arrested, beaten, or martyred, believers echoed David's words: "What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee." Church history records countless martyrs who faced death with both honest fear and triumphant faith—not because they lacked normal human emotions but because they chose trust in God's promises over submission to terror.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How does David's honest acknowledgment of fear challenge modern Christian culture's tendency to equate faith with the absence of negative emotions?
2. What is the difference between denying fear (unhealthy suppression) and choosing trust despite fear (biblical faith)?
3. In what current situations are you experiencing fear, and how specifically can you choose trust in God's character and promises?
4. How does understanding that trust is volitional (a choice) rather than merely emotional (a feeling) change your approach to difficult circumstances?
5. What practical spiritual disciplines help cultivate the habit of choosing trust when fear arises—Scripture memory, prayer, community, etc.?

Interlinear Text

וְאֵלֶּיךָ	אֶפְתָּחַ:	אֶלֶּיךָ	אֶפְתָּחַ:	אֶפְתָּחַ:
What time	I am afraid	H589	H413	I will trust
H3117	H3372			H982

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 34:4 (Parallel theme): I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears.

1 Samuel 30:6 (Parallel theme): And David was greatly distressed; for the people spake of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters: but David encouraged himself in the LORD his God.

2 Chronicles 20:3 (Parallel theme): And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.

Psalms 11:1 (Faith): In the LORD put I my trust: how say ye to my soul, Flee as a bird to your mountain?

1 Samuel 21:12 (Parallel theme): And David laid up these words in his heart, and was sore afraid of Achish the king of Gath.

1 Samuel 21:10 (Parallel theme): And David arose, and fled that day for fear of Saul, and went to Achish the king of Gath.

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