

## Shrill Faith for the Nighttime

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*September 22, 2002*

PSALM 30:4-11

LUKE 18:1-8

You will recall that President Gerald Ford, when he became president after the long process of expelling Richard Nixon from the presidency, said—in his first public utterance as president—“America’s long nightmare is over.” He meant that we could move on and restore civic life. It interests me greatly that he used the image of “nightmare” for that national trauma, an image that gives me a beginning point for my words to you.

### I

Nighttime is an odd time in human life, indicated by the fact that young children never want to go to bed. It is a scary time. It is a time out of control, plus the fact that you might miss something. In the daytime, before we go to bed, we mostly manage and cope, and even do well, and stay in control of our lives as best we can. When we wake up the next morning, we may sleep late or get up early; but either way, we take on the day and pick up our activities and responsibilities and cope, more-or-less as best we can.

But in between going to bed and waking up, there is that odd time when we let our guard down. We can’t help it. We let our guard down because, as we say, we “lose consciousness.” In an age before electricity, it was a very dark time and the forces beyond our control—either real or imagined—crowded in our lives. That is why ghosts and spooks operate at night, out of

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control, when we cannot see them. That is why, moreover, the pivotal events in biblical faith happen at nighttime, when we cannot see them. Specifically, the deliverance of Israel from Egypt happened at night and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead happened at night when no one saw. All of us, moreover, know about the night when we hear strange noises and our anxieties become large, and we go over and over and over things that are beyond our control. Sigmund Freud, of course, made a defining study of dreams; he understood that in dreams unexpected and sometimes unwelcome messages come to us that have force and meaning, often embodying those arts of our life that we do not understand or control. Unlike the daytime, the nighttime is *vulnerable* and *exposed* and *dangerous*. It is that time when we cannot manage, and people of faith are drawn to God as a source of safety when there is no other source of safety, and as a source of presence when the world feels absent.

And now, nightmares are very big in our world . . . wars and rumors of war and terror and assault and threat and violence. We feel unsafe and we dream up all kinds of security programs that do not in fact make us any safer, but if anything, only more anxious. Daytime is for *obedience and virtue and morality*. But nighttime is for *threat and danger and anxiety*.

## II

In this sermon, I want to think about the special, mostly neglected resources of faith given in the Bible for the nighttime when we are under threat. I want to consider with you one psalm in which the psalmist tells about his own crisis of faith. And of course the reason we pay attention to this particular experience of that ancient psalmist, and the reason his experience got into the Bible, is because that experience of faith reported here is so very like our own.

Psalm 30 is like a “journal” of *two days and one night* in the stressful reality of faith. I share this psalm with you because it seems clear that the Bible has resources that are much needed in our time of great societal nightmare.

The speaker of Psalm 30 is a person of immense faith and is eager to share that faith. In introductory comments, the speaker says, “I want you all to join in songs of faith with me”:

Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,  
and give thanks to his holy name.

(Ps. 30:4)

Everyone must join in this song. And here is the reason:

For God's anger is but for a moment;  
 his favor is for a lifetime.  
 Weeping may linger for the night,  
 but joy comes with the morning.  
 (Ps. 30:5)

God does indeed get angry, and that causes alienation. But God's anger is brief; in Hebrew the word is "like a beat"! That is compared to God's favor toward us that lasts a lifetime, much, much longer than the anger, and that is cause for celebration. Indeed, sadness and weeping might last through the night, but then comes joy.

So the speaker makes four contrasts:

anger	favor
beat	a lifetime
sorrow	joy
night	morning

The bad stuff is real, and the psalmist does not deny that. But the bad stuff that is real is not the last thing, because the last thing is the light of morning that God reliably gives that overrides every season of nightmare. That is the theme of the psalm, but then the speaker goes back over it in greater detail.

### III

The speaker says, "*Let me tell you about the first day* of this tale. It was a great day. I was on top of the world, everything was good, everything was right, 'all things were bright and beautiful':

As for me, I said in my prosperity,  
 "I shall never be moved."  
 By your favor, O LORD,  
 you had established me as a strong mountain.  
 (Ps. 30:6–7a)

"I was so confident of a good job, good family, good house, good education, good healthcare, good income. I was so confident that I said, not meaning to brag, 'I will never be tottered,' never be shaken or made unstable. That is what I said as I went to bed. I was so happy and I was so sure and I was so grateful to God."

## IV

But then, says the speaker, “*Let me tell you about the night.* All of a sudden, just as night came, right in the middle of verse 7, without explanation, trouble came just when I was so cocky.” It happened that day, all at once and the world came crumbling down:

- a pink slip
- a pregnant teenager
- a cancer diagnosis
- a terrorist attack
- an Enron debacle
- an old secret exposed to shameful light.

And there is a flood of vexed feeling. The psalmist says it this way:

you hid your face;  
I was dismayed.  
(Ps. 30:7b)

The biblical way of talking is that we live because God’s face shines upon us, or as we say, “The LORD bless you and keep you and cause his face to shine upon you.” It is the way of a small child who is frantic but is suddenly okay when she sees her mother’s face. But if mother turns away or is absent or is unavailable or is unresponsive, the world is immediately a place of threat. When God’s face of blessing was hidden, “I was in dismay.”

What to do in the nightmare? Well, this is a person of faith. And what the faithful know to do is to *pray vigorously*, to *summon* God, to *address urgent imperatives* to God, confident that even in the night, the God beyond all nightmares is reachable. This is what the psalmist says:

To you, O LORD, I cried,  
and to the LORD I made supplication.  
(Ps. 30:8)

“I addressed the very God who was absent. I addressed God and I began to dispute with God”:

“What profit is there in my death,  
if I go down to the Pit?  
Will the dust praise you?  
Will it tell of your faithfulness?”  
(Ps. 30:9)

“I made the case to God that letting me die in the night would not do God any good. I took myself to be so important that I reminded God I would be

worthless to God if God let me die. Since I sing in the choir, I reminded God that if God lost me, there would be one less singer and that much less praise addressed to God. I pressed God and I appealed to God's self-interest. My prayer was a little manipulative, but I was desperate”:

What profit is there in my death,  
 if I go down to the Pit?  
 Will the dust praise you?  
 Will it tell of your faithfulness?  
 (Ps. 30:9)

And then I addressed God in heavy, weighty imperatives that I had never dared sound before:

- Hear me
- Be gracious to me
- Be my helper.

I called God by name twice, so that there would be no confusion on God's part that it was this God whom I expected to help me:

Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me!  
 O LORD, be my helper!”  
 (Ps. 30:10)

I am rather astonished at myself as I think about my prayer, because I never thought I would be so bold and assertive to take the upper hand in the night and insist that God must do what I needed to have done. I would never talk to God that way in the daytime; but in the night, when you are desperate, you can try anything. As soon as I had carried my case to God, I left the problem with God and I went to sleep, confident that God would be at work even in the middle of the night, even in the presence of the nightmare.

## V

And then says the psalmist, “I woke up at daybreak.” It had been a terrible night, but not as terrible for me as for God. In my anxiety I had given God a huge assignment. My prayer to God was that God deal with the nightmare when I was dismayed. I did not know if God would answer, but I had no alternative. In the daytime, I would have gotten other help; but at night, in the nightmare, clearly God is the only source of help.

So imagine my surprise and my delight when the next day came, and my life had been healed by the hidden work of the God who resolves all nightmares. *Let me tell you about the next morning.* In the morning I gave thanks to God:

You have turned my mourning into dancing;  
 you have taken off my sackcloth  
 and clothed me with joy,  
 so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.  
 O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.  
 (Ps. 30:11–12)

Think of that! . . .

- mourning to dancing
- funeral clothes to clothes of joy.

A new life—a new day—a new chance. Since that dark night when God overrode the nightmare, my whole life has been a dance of gladness, of endless praise, of endless thanks, of endless well-being, close to God, no longer dismayed.

## VI

“I am so glad,” says the psalmist, “that I belong to this community of faith that has this pattern of prayer. We are the ones who have a way through beyond nightmares.” The way is with a God who has power even in the night, and who hears and who acts, and we find our life transformed.

Says the psalmist, “I am astonished that I spoke to God in such a demanding way: *Hear—be gracious—help me!* All around me are people who say, “Keep your mouth shut and cope and pretend it’s okay.” But the news that comes clear to me is that if we come boldly to God, strange things happen that cause joy in the morning. “You know,” says the psalmist, “my experience is very much like the parable about prayer that Jesus will teach in about five centuries”:

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. (Luke 18:1)

The parable is about a woman who nagged and nagged until the judge gave her a favorable ruling. The point of the parable is to carry the nightmare to God and insist that God should deal with it, and then to trust your life to the God of all nightmares.

If we tough it out in silence, we will lose heart and grow cynical. But Jesus says:

Pray always . . . and do not lose heart.

That is a good word to a society that is overwhelmed with nightmares:

Pray always . . . and do not lose heart.