

Do Not Forsake Me

Psalm 27
July 16, 2017

Dr. David B. Hartman, Jr.
First Christian Church **Wichita Falls, Texas**

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes—they shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, Lord, do I seek.

Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.

Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

NOTE: THE DVD FOR “HIGH NOON” IS AVAILABLE FOR CHECK OUT IN THE CHURCH LIBRARY. THE SCENES THAT ARE REFERENCED IN THE NOTES CAN BE FOUND IN THE CHAPTER LISTINGS ON THE DVD, OR THEY MAY BE FOUND ON YOU TUBE UNDER “HIGH NOON: WIFE AND WIDOW” AND “HIGH NOON: CHURCH SCENE.”

Do not forsake me, O my darling

On this, our wedding day,

Do not forsake me, O my darling, wait....

Wait along...

The noonday train will bring Frank Miller.

If I'm a man, I must be brave,

*and I must face that deadly killer,
Or lie a coward, a craven coward,
Or lie a coward in my grave.*

Those are the opening words to the theme song from *High Noon*, the greatest Western ever made, though it's not a traditional western. For one thing, unlike most Westerns, it's almost all dialogue. It's a movie about the decisions that go into making moral choices, though in this case it's not a choice between right and wrong for our hero, but between two competing goods. In his case, the competing goods are love and duty.

It begins on a Sunday morning. Church is getting ready to begin. Over at the office of the Justice of the Peace, Marshal Will Kane is getting married to a young Quaker woman. After the wedding, he will hand over his badge and guns, and he and his bride will begin a new life in another town. Will Kane had been an outstanding marshal. He had established law and order in a town that had been "wide open," where "a decent woman couldn't walk out in broad daylight." He had sent a vicious killer, Frank Miller, to prison, and driven his gang out of town. The next morning, the new marshal would be arriving. The town fathers, who were there to cheer him at his wedding, assured him the town would be fine until then. But as Will Kane and his bride are preparing to depart, he gets word that Frank Miller had been pardoned. Not only that, but three members of his gang are at the station waiting for him to arrive on the noon train. When the gang reunite, they plan to make good on Miller's vow to kill the marshal. Kane changes his mind and refuses to leave town. He has to face Miller and his gang, but he's confident that he can get the town's upstanding citizens to serve as acting deputies and stare the gang down

until the new marshal arrives the next day. But his new bride doesn't understand why he won't leave:

FIRST CLIP: "WIFE OR WIDOW": 13.47-18.20.

There you have it. His bride, a devout Quaker who loves him, doesn't understand his choice. Neither does the judge who just performed his marriage. They don't know why he won't leave, and why he won't choose love over duty. Kane sets out looking for volunteers to help him. A few step up—a family man, who expected to be part of a large posse and later backs out; a one-eyed alcoholic; a 14 year old boy. Kane sends them away. But when he tries to seek help elsewhere, he's rebuffed. His young deputy is angry at him for not having angled to get him the marshal's job. The old marshal is crippled with arthritis. The town fathers are afraid of Miller and his thugs. The town saloon is filled with people who were friends with Miller and his gang, and who liked the old days when Hadleyville was wild. All the time, the clock is getting closer to high noon.

*Oh, to be torn 'twixt love and duty,
'Sposing I lose my fair-haired beauty,
Look at that big hand move along
Nearing high noon.
He made a vow while in state prison,
Said it would be my life or his'n,
I'm not afraid of death, but oh...
What would I do,
If you leave me?*

Gary Cooper didn't wear makeup for the film, and it's riveting to watch him.

His is the face of a man in anguish. He was 50 years old (Grace Kelly, in her first

starring film role, was 21). He had injured his back before filming began, but he still engaged in a brutal fight scene with the much younger Lloyd Bridges, refusing to use a stunt double. He was also recovering from surgery for a bleeding ulcer. Throughout the movie, Cooper was in a lot of physical pain. You can see it in his face. But his face also reveals the soul of a man who fully comprehends the anguish that can come from being true to your code of honor, even if it costs you your life and what, or whom, you love most in the world.

Our scripture reading is Psalm 27. It's either written by two different people, or by the same person at two different times in his life. In the first half, he's confident of God's presence:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes—they shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

The most frequently cited commandment in the Bible—it's there 365 times—is some version of “Don't be afraid,” or “Fear not.” But there are occasions when it's easier to be confident and fearless. Those occasions are when you know people have your back; even more, when you know that the Lord does:

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

But what if you *are* all alone?

Will Kane knew that most of the townspeople respected him and appreciated what he had done for them. Most of those people happened to be in church that Sunday morning:

SECOND CLIP, “CHURCH MEETING: 43.22-54.40.”

They all had their reasons, their justifications. The small group that instinctively wanted to support him were talked out of it: the cost would be too high, it would be bad for commerce, it was the politicians' fault, it was the government's responsibility, Kane should have gone and stayed away. Even the old marshal basically said that the town and its people weren't worth it, and that Kane should have left. But nonetheless, he persisted. *Why?*

The second half of our scripture comes from a very different perspective than the first half. The second half is by someone who feels alone, and is begging the Lord not to leave him:

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

"Come," my heart says, "seek his face!" Your face, Lord, do I seek.

Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, *do not forsake me*, O God of my salvation!

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

It's a different order from a lot of other Psalms, which move from fear and doubt to triumph. Here, in this Psalm, the order is reversed. First, there was the triumph, and then there was the desperate hope: "*Do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!* Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries...they are breathing violence."

So why didn't Kane leave? Everybody who cared about him kept telling him he should have—his wife, the mayor, his former deputy, the former marshal. Some of them called him a fool. Little kids played games in which he died. True heroism is never a matter of certainty, but of deep uncertainty. It comes with the unshakeable awareness that you may not only fail, but the odds are that you will. A writer named Emmett Booth reflected on the nature of heroism:

It's not that being the hero is stupid, it's that being the hero is *hard*, and you might fail at it. But that doesn't mean the attempt is worthless...it is *not* easy to be good, and the rewards for being so are not automatic, but...this only makes it more powerful if you choose to do the right thing anyway. "No chance, and no choice."¹

Do not forsake me, oh my darling.

You made that promise when we wed.

Do not forsake me, oh my darling.

Although you're grieving,

I can't be leaving,

until I shoot Frank Miller dead.

Wait along....wait along....

Wait along...

The composer, Dimitri Tiomkin, won Oscars for best musical score and best song, "Do Not Forsake Me, O My Darling." When the movie was previewed, the critics didn't like it, and because it was panned, the studio didn't want to release it. Tiomkin later said, "...film experts agreed that the picture was a flat failure," so he bought the rights to the song he had written, "Do Not Forsake Me, O My Darling," and released it as a single sung by Frankie Laine. The song was a big hit, and because it was, the studio finally released the film after four months. The song (which in the movie is sung by Tex Ritter) saved the movie's life. Interestingly, the tune may have been based on an old Russian folk song. Tiomkin had been born in Russia, and originally supported the Bolsheviks. But he became disenchanted and left for Berlin in 1921. He came to the United States in 1925.

¹ Emmett Booth, "Game of Thrones is Increasingly Incoherent and Somehow Still Magical," The Concourse, July 13, 2017.

Gary Cooper won the 1952 Oscar for Best Actor for his portrayal of Will Kane. He was in Europe at the time of the presentation, and so his close friend, John Wayne accepted the Oscar on his behalf. Wayne loved Cooper but he detested the movie—years later, he called it “the most unAmerican thing” he had ever seen, and he had turned down the role of Will Kane (though in accepting the Oscar on behalf Cooper, Wayne jokingly said he was mad at his agent for not getting him the part). Wayne detested the movie for political reasons. The screenwriter, Carl Foreman, had been called before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee in 1947, which was investigating “Communist propaganda and influence” in the motion pictures. Foreman was asked to give the names of anyone he suspected of being a Communist or a Communist sympathizer. He refused, was cited as an uncooperative witness and was subsequently blacklisted, which meant he couldn’t work in Hollywood anymore. He evidently intended the cowardly townspeople of Hadleyville to represent the cowardly Hollywood community. Foreman sold his rights to the film to Stanley Kramer, the producer, and moved to Great Britain. John Wayne wasn’t the only one who had rejected the role. Gregory Peck also turned it down, as did Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift and Charlton Heston. Finally, Gary Cooper, older than any of the others, accepted. He was in pain the entire time he made it, and I can’t imagine anyone else in the role.

In later years, the director, Fred Zimmerman, would make another movie about a man who followed his conscience at all costs. It was called “A Man for All Seasons,” and it was based on the life of Thomas More, who was convicted of treason and beheaded for refusing to bless the annulment of King Henry VIII’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon so that he could marry his mistress, Anne Boleyn. In “A Man for all Seasons,” one of More’s friends begs him to change his mind and join them “for fellowship’s sake.” More answers, “And when you have gone to

heaven for obeying your conscience, and I have gone to hell for disobeying mine, will you follow me there, for fellowship's sake?" Sometimes, whatever else our friends say, we have to follow our conscience. It can be the loneliest feeling in the world.

Though some in the United States denounced the movie as "unAmerican," the film was also denounced in the Soviet Union as "a glorification of the individual." Many freedom lovers saw that as its greatest virtue. When the Polish labor movement Solidarity arose in opposition to the regime of the Communist government, and compelled the first free election there in 1989, the image it used on its posters to encourage Poles to vote was that of Gary Cooper as Marshal Will Kane, holding a ballot and, above his sheriff's star, the words "Solidarity." Lech Walesa, the leader of Solidarity and, later, the first freely elected Polish President in 40 years, talked about that poster. He said the Communist regime

...tried to ridicule the freedom movement in Poland as an invention of the "Wild" West, especially the U.S. But the poster had the opposite impact: Cowboys in Western clothes had become a powerful symbol for Poles. Cowboys fight for justice, fight against evil, and fight for freedom, both physical and spiritual. Solidarity trounced the Communists in that election, paving the way for a democratic government in Poland. It is always so touching when people bring this poster up to me to autograph it. They have cherished it for so many years and it has become the emblem of the battle that we all fought together.

President Ronald Reagan, who famously said, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" said that "High Noon" was his all-time favorite movie.

If you want to see how it ends, stick around—we'll show the end after the benediction. There's a lot of gunplay in it, which wouldn't be appropriate to show during a service of worship. But I want to leave you with this final thought.

There are times when we feel forsaken. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as he was dying on the cross, cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He was quoting Psalm 22, because the sense of being forsaken by loved ones, and even by God, is one that almost all of us experience at some point, even our Lord and Savior. But...but...in the end, the call of love sent Will Kane’s wife back to him, at the point that he most needed her. In the end, she saved his life. At that point, love and duty converged. The movie is a work of fiction, but it speaks to a larger truth: never forget the power of love, which is not only an emotion, but a call to duty. Even when you feel most forsaken, you are not forgotten. Even when it seems as if doing the right thing is to make your life a party of one, the invisible powers of God’s love and God’s purpose are still at work. And never stop believing that you “shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord! Amen.