

# In God I Trust

*Psalm 56:1–13*

Wednesday Evening Study | February 25, 2026

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## Archaeological Moment: Two Questions Worth Asking

If you had walked into a well-appointed home in the ancient Greco-Roman world, you might have noticed small, slender glass or ceramic flasks set near the burial goods of the deceased. These delicate vessels are called lachrymatories — from the Latin *lacrima*, meaning *tear* — or, more simply, tear bottles. Mourners used them to collect their tears as a way of honoring grief, a way of saying: *this loss is real, and worth keeping*. Some were also used to hold perfume placed inside a tomb, not entirely unlike the small air fresheners we tuck into our cars today.

The practice enjoyed a remarkable revival during the Victorian era. Tear bottles were distributed at funerals, and the period of official mourning was said to last as long as it took for the tears inside to evaporate. When the bottle was dry, the season of grief was over — grief measured by weight, and then finally released. The practice crossed the Atlantic and became especially common in America during the Civil War. Wives whose husbands had gone off to battle would weep into these small bottles and then, when their husbands returned, present them as evidence of how deeply they had been missed.

I bring all of this up because of one remarkable verse we will encounter tonight in Psalm 56. When David is at his most desperate — alone, hunted, pretending madness at the gates of Gath — he says this to God:

*You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book? — Psalm 56:8*

David is not speaking metaphorically in some vague sense. He is reaching for the most intimate image of attentive grief that his world knew. And he is saying: God has been doing this. Every tear wept on the run, every tear shed in the dirt of Gath — God has been collecting them.

Before we get there, I have a second question, and it connects to this psalm just as directly. What single phrase in the English language has been reproduced in print more than any other?

The answer is found right here in Psalm 56, verse 11: *“In God I trust.”* In its slightly expanded form — *“In God We Trust”* — this phrase appears on every coin and every bill in circulation

in the United States. It is engraved at the back of the chamber of the United States Congress. It has been printed billions upon billions of times. Its history on American currency is itself worth noting: the phrase first appeared on U.S. coins during the Civil War, a period of national anguish not entirely unlike the personal anguish from which this psalm was born. By 1956 it was established as the official national motto, and it has appeared on all paper currency ever since.

Tonight we are going back to the source. Not to a coin, not to a motto stamped in metal, but to the moment this phrase was first forged — by a desperate man, alone in enemy territory, drooling on his own beard to stay alive. That is where “In God I trust” was born. That is the context that gives it its true weight.

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### **The Title: A Miktam of David**

Let us begin with the superscription: *“To the choirmaster: according to The Dove on Far-off Terebinths. A Miktam of David, when the Philistines seized him in Gath.”*

The word *Miktam* is one of the more intriguing terms in the entire Psalter. It appears in only six psalm titles — Psalms 16 and 56 through 60 — and in every case it is attached to a psalm of David written in a moment of acute personal crisis. Scholars have debated its meaning for centuries. Some connect it to the Hebrew word *ketem*, meaning *gold*, suggesting this is a poem of exceptional worth — a golden psalm. Jerome held this view. Others connect it to the Akkadian *katamu*, meaning *to cover* or *conceal*, and read it as a private, inward prayer not meant for public display. Still others conclude that *Miktam* simply designated a musical form that has been lost to us entirely.

I find myself drawn to holding two of these meanings together. A Miktam may be both a deeply personal prayer pressed out of crisis — something almost too private to be spoken aloud — and at the same time a psalm of extraordinary value, a golden poem. Both descriptions suit Psalm 56 perfectly. This is David at his most vulnerable, and what he produces in that vulnerability turns out to be one of the most enduring declarations of faith ever written.

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### **The Setting: David at the Gates of Gath**

To understand this psalm, you must know the story that surrounds it. We find it in 1 Samuel 21.

Saul, the first king of Israel, had been chosen at the people's demand. They wanted a king like all the other nations, and God gave them exactly that — a king who was proud, paranoid, and incapable of trusting the Lord. Saul's inability to trust God curdled into disobedience and cruelty, and his reign increasingly unraveled. And so God made clear that his time was finished. He would choose a king after His own heart.

The young man God chose was David. Samuel anointed him secretly, and the Spirit of God rushed upon him from that day forward. But David's path to the throne would be anything but smooth. As his reputation grew, as his fame spread through the kingdom, Saul's jealousy turned murderous. The man who had been his champion — the one who slew Goliath and expanded Saul's kingdom — was now the object of the king's obsession. David had to flee.

His first instinct was a good one: he went to the tabernacle, to the priest Ahimelech. If the king has gone off the rails, go to God's house. But David quickly realized that Ahimelech could not offer him the protection he needed. He did receive two gifts from the priest that would follow him into the psalm: five loaves of bread and the sword of Goliath — the very blade of the giant he had killed.

And then David made what may be the worst decision of his life. Afraid of Saul, he fled to Gath.

Gath. The hometown of Goliath. And David arrived there carrying Goliath's sword.

It is difficult to imagine a more catastrophically ill-conceived refuge. The servants of Achish, the Philistine king, recognized David immediately. *“Is not this David the king of the land? Did they not sing of him, ‘Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands?’”* (1 Samuel 21:11). The Scripture tells us plainly what happened next: David took these words to heart and was much afraid. He was alone. His enemies in Israel were hunting him. Now the Philistines had him. So David did the only thing he could think of — he acted insane, making marks on the doors of the gate, letting spittle run down his beard, until Achish lost interest in him and let him go.

It is there, in that gate, in that desperate performance, that Psalm 56 was written. That is the Miktam of David.

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## **Naming the Danger (vv. 1–2)**

*Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly.*

Notice how David begins. He does not open with a tidy theological statement. He does not begin by telling God how great He is, working up to his request from a safe distance. He begins with the truth of where he is.

The language of these opening verses is deliberate in its intensity. *Man tramples on me. All day long. Oppresses me. Trample* — again. *All day long* — again. The repetition is not accidental. David is giving God a felt account of his situation: no matter what direction I turn, they are always coming. Always pursuing. There is no rest, no direction that is safe.

This is a man who is overwhelmed, and he says so. That honesty is itself a form of faith. David does not pretend to be fine. He does not perform a spiritual composure he does not possess. He comes to God with his actual experience, not a sanitized version of it.

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### **The First Chorus: When I Am Afraid (vv. 3–4)**

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?

Here is the first appearance of the refrain that will anchor the entire psalm. Mark the opening words carefully: *When I am afraid*. David is not denying the fear. He is not claiming to have moved past it or conquered it. He is afraid — and he says so plainly. But in the act of turning to God, something begins to shift.

*“I put my trust in you.”* The trust is not a feeling that arrives on its own. It is a decision, an act of will, a deliberate orientation of the soul toward God in the middle of fear rather than in the absence of it.

And the ground of that trust? *“In God, whose word I praise.”* Three times in this short psalm, David returns to the word of God as the foundation of his confidence. Apart from God’s word, we do not know what God is like. We do not know what He has promised. David had only the Pentateuch, perhaps Joshua and Judges — a fraction of the Bible we now hold. But it was enough. It was enough to know God’s character and to know that God is faithful.

David may also have been thinking of the specific word God had spoken through Samuel at his anointing, when the Spirit rushed upon him. God had made a promise. And because God had spoken, David could trust.

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## Slander and Surveillance (vv. 5–7)

*All day long they injure my cause; all their thoughts are against me for evil. They stir up strife, they lurk; they watch my steps, as they have waited for my life. For their crime will they escape? In wrath cast down the peoples, O God!*

Here David names a second layer of his suffering, beyond the physical danger. His enemies — and Saul would have been chief among them — are twisting his words. They are constructing a narrative against him, turning his actions and speech into evidence of betrayal, working to isolate him further and to justify what they intend to do to him.

This is a particular kind of cruelty. Physical danger is terrible, but slander hollows out a person differently. It attacks not just the body but the reputation, the relationships, the very ability to tell one's own story truthfully. David names this too. He holds nothing back from God.

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## God's Attentiveness: The Tear Bottle (vv. 8–9)

*You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book? Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me.*

We have arrived at the center of the psalm, and here David's gaze shifts entirely. He stops cataloguing the fury of his enemies and turns to look at what God has been doing.

*"You have kept count of my tossings."* Every restless night. Every hour David could not sleep for fear, turning from side to side in whatever hiding place he had found — God had been counting. Not one night had been missed.

*"Put my tears in your bottle."* This is where the archaeological moment from the opening of the evening comes fully alive. In the ancient world, to collect someone's tears in a lachrymatory was an act of profound attention — a way of saying: your grief is real, and I honor it enough to keep it. David is saying that God has been doing this. Every tear wept in the wilderness, every tear in the dirt at Gath — God has been gathering them. Not in some vague, sentimental sense. Specifically. Attentively. As one who keeps records.

*"Are they not in your book?"* The image deepens. Not only a bottle, but a book — a record kept with the precision and care of a scribe who leaves nothing out. God has seen. God has noted. God remembers.

And then verse 9 follows with a confidence born of that knowledge: *"Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me."*

Notice the verb David chooses. Not *I feel*. Not *I hope*. *I know*. The certainty is not grounded in his circumstances — which could not be worse. It is grounded in the character of God as revealed in His covenant faithfulness. God keeps count. God collects tears. Therefore — God is for me.

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## The Second Chorus: Fear Has Left the Building (vv. 10–11)

*In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?*

Here is the refrain again — but something has changed, and it is worth pausing to mark it carefully.

The first time David sang this chorus, it began: *When I am afraid, I put my trust in you*. The fear was present. It was named. It was part of the refrain.

This time, “*when I am afraid*” is simply gone. The fear has not been suppressed or ignored. It has been displaced — by the knowing attentiveness and faithfulness of God that David rehearsed in verses 8 and 9. He has looked away from his circumstances long enough to look at his God, and when he looks back, the fear has broken.

Notice also the shift in divine name. The first chorus referred to *God* (Elohim). This chorus adds a second name: *the LORD* — Yahweh, the covenant name of God, the name bound to steadfast love and faithfulness and the unbreakable promises made to David’s fathers. By the time David reaches his second chorus, he is reaching deeper into the character of God.

*“In God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?”*

The question is rhetorical, and David knows it. He knows full well what man can do — man can oppress, slander, hunt, and kill. He has experienced every one of these things in recent days. But the question is not what man can do in isolation. The question is what man can do when God has entered the equation. When God is for you, the arithmetic changes entirely. Paul, centuries later, would echo this same logic: “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*” (Romans 8:31). He was drawing from the same well.

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## Walking in the Light of Life (vv. 12–13)

*I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you. For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.*

The psalm closes with a vow of thanksgiving — made not after the deliverance, but in anticipation of it. David speaks of what God has done in the past tense even though, standing in that gate at Gath, the deliverance has not yet come. This is the grammar of faith: speaking of God’s future faithfulness as though it were already accomplished, because it rests on a character that cannot change.

“*That I may walk before God in the light of life.*” This is the destination toward which the whole psalm has been moving. Not simply survival. Not simply escape from Gath. But life lived in the presence and light of God — life reoriented by trust.

The old Scottish Baptist minister Alexander Maclaren observed that Jesus himself seems to take up this very language in the Gospel of John, where He declares: “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*” (John 8:12). What David prayed for in the dark at Gath is fulfilled in Christ for all who believe. The light of life that David reached toward by faith, we now walk in by union with the one who is himself that light.

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### Application: The Context in Which the Phrase Does Its Greatest Work

So we come back to where we began. “In God We Trust” — on every coin, every bill, tucked into wallets, rattling in pockets. The most printed phrase in the English language. And most of the time, we never give it a second thought.

David gave it a first thought. He gave it his whole heart. And he gave it not in a moment of comfortable prosperity, not as a national motto stamped in metal, but at the gates of Gath — alone, hunted, drooling on his beard, pretending madness just to survive the night. That is the context in which this phrase was born. That is where it does its greatest work. Not on currency, but in the crucible.

The progression of Psalm 56 is an invitation for every one of us to walk the same path David walked that night. He begins overwhelmed and afraid, and he says so honestly. He does not begin with fine theology. He begins with the truth of where he is. Then, in the act of prayer, something happens. He remembers who God is. He remembers what God has said. He remembers that God has been watching, counting, collecting, recording. And the fear that saturated

the first chorus is simply absent from the second — not because the circumstances have changed, but because David has shifted. He has looked away from his enemies long enough to look at his God.

That is the invitation of Psalm 56 tonight. Whatever is trampling you right now — whatever pursues you all day long, twists your words, watches your steps — God knows. He has counted those restless nights. He has not missed a single tossing. And your tears are in His bottle. Every one of them.

*“This I know,”* David says. *“God is for me.”*

And if God is for you, what can man do to you?