

Psalm 55 Cast your burden on the Lord

Have any of you had the experience of someone who knows that you are a Christian saying to you, “Christianity is just a crutch”? It is quite a common accusation. It implies that only people who are inadequate to face life on their own are Christians.

My answer goes something like this. When I hit a problem, the first person I turn to is Anne. Does that mean that my marriage can be dismissed as being “just a crutch”? I hope not. Two people get married because they love each other, and part of that relationship is that they support and help each other through the trials of life.

Being a Christian does mean that there is a new relationship in your life and part of that relationship is knowing that God is there with you, ready to share the difficulties you face. But as with the marriage, the important thing is the relationship of love and support, not an admission of being inadequate.

I wonder how you felt as we read through psalm 55 a moment ago. Certainly, when I first read it, I found it confusing. It is full of anxiety, fear and anger; and yet mixed in with all these negative feelings there is great confidence in God. There is no logical development. The writer’s thoughts seem to go like a ball in a pinball machine from panic to sorrow to anger to faith. This is not a carefully constructed essay written with the benefit of hindsight; it is the experience of a man wrestling with the reality of anxiety. He is not just telling us as he reaches the end that prayer *can* make a difference when we are experiencing trouble; the psalm shows *how* prayer *did* make a difference to a man who was in trouble. Somebody may object that Christians should not worry. After all, did Jesus not tell his disciples not to worry? In Matthew 6 Jesus rebukes his disciples for their worried expressions and reminds them that their heavenly Father looks after the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Jesus points out to the

disciples how shallow their faith is. But the fact that Jesus taught about worry shows that he knew what we are like; he knew that anxiety comes naturally to all of us, some more than others. The truth is that Christians do have to battle with worry, just as everyone else does. There is nothing about becoming a Christian that immunises us from worry. We only have to look at the lives of God's saints both in the Bible and outside to see that. The difference that faith makes is not that it makes us stress-free, but that it gives us an extra resource in times of stress.

Let's look at the range of emotions that tumble through David's heart and mind. And as we do so, let's not forget that this is a man of great courage – the same David who faced up to Goliath and spent much of his life being hunted down by King Saul. He was also a man who walked closely with God, a man after God's own heart, the man who wrote that great song of confidence in God which begins "*The Lord's my shepherd*". This is the man who

wrote this psalm as well, so we may be very sure that being a man or woman of faith does not mean that we will be free from anxiety.

The first thing to notice about David is that he brings his situation to God in prayer.

"Listen to my prayer, O God,

Do not ignore my plea;

Hear me and answer me" (verse 1)

Praying when we are in trouble is not some kind of magic. It's not like we just say a few words, put Amen at the end and suddenly all is well. Prayer does mean that we are reaffirming our relationship with our Father and finding a place where we can work through our anxieties and face up to them.

"My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught" (verse 2)

David's thoughts are bewildered, his mind is in turmoil. He then starts to suspect other people of plotting against him:

"The voice of the enemy, the stares of the wicked" (verse 3)

Wherever he went he felt surrounded by hostile stares. He sensed other people's eyes on him. He heard them whispering behind his back. And then he describes (verses 4 and 5) how his tortured mind is affecting his whole being. The literal translation of the Hebrew text for verse 4 says: "My heart writhes in my guts". He feels as if his stomach is tied in knots; and I'm sure many of us know what it's like to be unable to sleep, break out in a cold sweat and have tension headaches.

It's no wonder then that his mind turns to escape:

"Oh, that I had the wings of a dove" (verse 6)

In a sense we all need to escape. We all look for escape when we book our holidays, play sport, watch a film or read a book. These things are healthy, but of course they don't enable us to get away from problems totally, merely to get a break.

Unfortunately sometimes people try to escape their problems more permanently, perhaps through drugs or alcohol or by dropping out of

society. And then there is the temptation to deny our feelings, to switch off or suppress feelings of anxiety. But you can't run away from your feelings. They are part of you. So if we try to suppress anxious thoughts they can simply re-emerge in our minds in other, destructive ways.

If we take the psalm as a whole we see that David turns his back on the idea of trying to escape by running away.

Let's look now at verses which some people find disturbing, verses where David calls for judgement on his enemies. What are verses like verse 9 and verse 15 doing here?

"Confuse the wicked, O Lord, confound their speech,

For I see violence and strife in the city.

Let death take my enemies by surprise;

Let them go down alive to the grave,

For evil finds lodging among them."

How can the Bible contain verses like this along side teaching about loving one another and forgiving one another?

There are several points in the text of this psalm which give a response to that.

Firstly, David is angry because “*there is violence and strife in the city*” (verse 9). It is not a personal quarrel, it is quite clear that evil is affecting the whole of society. David sees this evil affecting his beloved city of Jerusalem and he is outraged.

When we see evil and injustice, it should make us angry too. The idea that anger is always wrong is quite mistaken. There are things we should be angry about, like cruelty, injustice and exploitation. There is no virtue in being indifferent when we see people suffering or evil flourishing.

When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, he explained why he was there:

“I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them.” (Exodus 3:7, 8)

God saw the suffering of his people and was about to act on their behalf.

And you know the story which we are reminded of at every baptism, the one where Jesus says, “*Let the little children come to me*” (Mark 10:14)

What we perhaps miss is that when Jesus saw the disciples rebuking the children, he was *indignant* because of the way the disciples were treating the children.

And so it should be with us; when we hear of bloodshed in Darfur or continuing unacceptable levels of child poverty in Scotland, these things should concern us. There is something wrong if we are not bothered.

Secondly, the anger and hostility which David felt was partly to do with his sense of justice for other people, but it was also a very real sense of injury to himself. This was no imaginary slight, it was a total betrayal. Who could have caused David such hurt? He writes: “*If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it;*

*If a foe were raising himself against me,
I could hide from him.
But it is you, a man like myself,
My companion, my close friend,
With whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship
As we walked with the throng at the house of
God” (verses 12-14)*

Could this have been Absalom, David’s own son who led a rebellion against him? At the very least it was a friend, a close colleague and someone who David thought was a fellow believer. They had gone to worship together, but now his close friend had let him down. It doesn’t take much imagination to see how badly David felt let down. Perhaps some of us can identify with him as we have been let down by people we were close to. Our parents may have rejected us; our children have turned away from us; our husband or wife has betrayed us. There are few things worse than rejection, especially if it is, as in David’s case, deliberately cruel and calculating.

It is no wonder that David feels hostility and anger. Even those who would argue that David falls below the standards of Jesus, we can’t blame him for feeling this way when he has been so abused.

Thirdly, notice that David is uttering these vengeful words in his private prayers, not in his actions. We know from 1 and 2 Samuel that David was in fact not a vindictive man. Again and again he spared the life of King Saul who tried repeatedly to kill him.

There was an occasion when Saul was hunting David down, and at one point goes into a cave to relieve himself. He does not realise that David and his men are hiding further back in the same cave. David could so easily have killed Saul, as indeed his men urged him to do, but instead he crept up and cut off a piece of Saul’s robe – proof that he could have killed him if he had wanted.

David was a man who felt deeply when people betrayed or abused him. He felt furious as any of us would do. But he did not take it out on his

enemies; instead he brought his feelings to God in prayer, he expressed his feelings before God and worked them out before his God.

There is a change of tone in verse 16:

“But I call to God

And the Lord saves me.

Evening, morning and noon

I cry out in distress,

and he hears my voice.”

(verses 16, 17)

This is not the end of the matter. Other feelings still raise their ugly heads as we see in verses 20 and 21, but David knows where to turn. He comes to the Lord in prayer. Perhaps his reference to evening, morning and noon is a reference to his regular prayer times – we don't know. What matters is that David is not left to cope with his feelings in his own loneliness; he is struggling with them as only a believer can, in the intimacy of his one-to-one relationship with God.

That is why he recommends the same pathway to us:

*“Cast your cares on the Lord
And He will sustain you.”* (verse 22)

AIDS IS REAL P301

I don't know about you, but I have occasionally felt slightly irritated when I am worried about something and some well-meaning person comes along and says: “Don't worry”.

It's annoying because it's not as simple as that. And yet I know that I say exactly the same to other people! Interestingly, I am convinced that the Bible never says to us “Don't worry, full stop, end of matter”

Let me give you 3 examples of what Scripture does teach us about facing worry.

Firstly, there is the example of Jesus himself.

Do not worry, said Jesus in Matthew chapter 6, but he did not stop there; he gave us a reason not to worry by telling us that our heavenly father cares for us.

Secondly, here are **Paul's words** from Philippians 4:6, 7:

“Do not be anxious about anything” (but he does not stop there either) “but in everything,

by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

There is little point in just telling someone not to worry. They could have thought of that themselves. What you need to do is to give them a reason not to worry. Direct your mind and your feelings to God.

Thirdly, we have the words of **today's psalm**:

“Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you”,

words which are echoed by Peter in his letter:

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7)

Early in his life Peter had been a very anxious person. He worried about what might happen to Jesus, and then when Jesus was arrested he worried even more about what might happen to himself. But as he grew older he learned not to worry, but rather to cast his cares on the Lord.

Why should we do that? Isn't it a form of escapism, the kind David wanted to do in Psalm 55 verses 6-8? No, it is exactly the opposite. It is learning to cast our cares on God which enables us not to run away but to stand firm and carry on with the task God has given us.

The bottom line is the last sentence of the psalm:

“But as for me, I trust in you”,

that is, in God

That is David's final testimony. Is it yours? If you are focussing on the evil around you, you may not be able to say those words. But you will be able to say it if you really do cast your cares on God.