



# Prayer in Suffering

How long, O Lord . . . ?

Martin Peppiatt writes

*'Even when storms surround us we can rest in Christ in prayer'*  
Elizabeth Wang

**W**hen you walk down the high street or go into a church for a Sunday service, half the people you see will be suffering in some way or other. It may be relatively mild; it may be quite acute and painful. In the church situation, we all do our best to be cheerful and we don't quickly reveal the pains in our hearts or our bodies. We can forget, perhaps, how widespread is this pain of human suffering, even in a supposedly peaceful country like Britain. Suffering is like temptation – 'common to man'.

But how do we go about praying in these situations of suffering which we often meet and indeed experience ourselves? Of course, we want to pray for our loved-ones and our fellow-Christians when they go through painful times. But how should we go about praying for ourselves, when we're going through it?

Some people can be so submerged by painful situations that they can't pray. It can be extremely hard to pray in certain illnesses – especially depressive illnesses. (Most illnesses are depressive, to some extent.) Then is the time when we need the prayers of our

friends and we should not feel bad if our own prayers dwindle away. Let's not be too shy to ask for Christian friends to pray for us when we hit the wall of suffering. If you're in a church where nobody ever does this, then your example may well help somebody else to start asking for prayer-help.

When we are well and strong ourselves, then is the time to pray for those who are down. During a fairly prolonged spell of ME some years ago, I found my own prayers shrivelled up into almost nothing; but I was hugely helped and blessed by the faithful prayers of those who cared about me.

But often we can pray in times of suffering. Yet it seems so difficult. What help can be found? Prayers in situations of pain and suffering are extremely common in the Psalms. The Psalms form the Christian's best prayer-book. Here is the true Book of Common Prayer, for every kind of Christian can use it.

## **Psalms are often cries for help**

So many of the psalms are cries for help and deliverance in times of trouble. Some people classify these psalms as 'laments', though I would prefer to call them simply cries for help. Did you know there are some

67 of such psalms (out of 150)? Some of them are laments over some seemingly desperate situation in the nation; some of them are urgent personal cries for help.

Incidentally, there are plenty of powerful one-liners. As I type this, I have just heard on the telephone some sad and very distressing news concerning a couple who are dear to us. I feel it in my stomach. I don't feel I can manage a long prayer for them, at this moment. Short one-liners is all I'm up to. Here are just a couple, chosen from many instances: 'I am in pain and distress: may your salvation, O God, protect me'. 'My days are like the evening shadow; I wither away like grass' (*Psalms 69: 29, 102: 11*). To be sure, He does take note of our distress, and he hears our cry. He truly cares for each one who is suffering.

### Making connection with God

In my experience, these psalms are extremely helpful in sustaining our spiritual life in the tough times. It can be easier to open a Bible and read a psalm than to start praying from scratch. But having read it, our heart makes a connection with our wonderful Lord and we can start communicating with Him. If we're reading a psalm which talks about vicious and spiteful enemies, we can apply this to our own struggle with all the evil forces lined up against us.

Sometimes, maybe, even to read a single psalm is too much for us. Then listening to a piece of uplifting music can be a vehicle to connect our hearts with God. Music can open a hatch and allow the water of prayer to start flowing again.

Before noting various recurring themes in these psalms of suffering, it's worth recalling how Jesus Himself drew on them in the hour of his bitterest trial. Three of the seven words from the Cross are prayers: the central cry of dereliction (My God, my God why...) comes from *Psalms 22:1* and the final word of total trust in His Father (Into your hands I commit my spirit) comes from *Psalms 31: 5*. We can follow our Lord's dying example.


### Wake up Lord, Why do you sleep!

You'll find the same strands cropping up again and again in these prayers of a suffering psalmist. I've noticed that there is a striking directness and immediacy in what they say. You have the impression that they're very used to talking to God - these psalms aren't one-off compositions. There's even a familiarity, which might seem a bit shocking: how about this - 'Wake up, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Don't reject us for ever' (44:23). That little appeal 'How long...' comes no less than 17 times.

Along with this urgency, there is a remarkable openness and honesty over the total situation, especially over the pain and distress that they are feeling. These are not psalms composed to be said (or sung) on the 14<sup>th</sup> evening of the month in some liturgical cycle. These writers have learned to open their hearts freely to God and pour out their distress before Him. They aren't ashamed or embarrassed to say exactly they're feeling. Listen to this one from the same Psalm 44, mentioned above: 'You sold your people for a pittance, gaining nothing from their sale' (*Psalms 44:12*). The writer tells the Lord He is like a rather pathetic salesman who doesn't really know what he's doing.

But in case you say 'Personally, I would never be so rude to God', you'll also find many a recollection of God's undying love and redeeming acts in days gone by. 'We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us what You did in days long ago': so begins that same Psalm 44.. And our appeals for help and mercy healing now are all based on that supreme Deliverance carved out through wood and nails at such a cost.

One other strand is worth mentioning. These pleas for help, these prayers of complaint often end with an expression of total trust in the Lord, perhaps with a determination that the time will surely come when we will again praise Him for His unfailing love. *Psalms 44* ends with both a pointed repeat of the cry for help *and* the reminder of God's true character: 'rise up and help us; redeem us because of your unfailing love'.

For some readers of this article, we are not talking about some theoretical future problem: you are caught up in some extremely painful situation this very day. Is God waiting for me to start praying about it? Mercifully, no. His loving compassion reaches down to you this very day, whether you manage to pray or not. But it is very good, in every way, to start pouring out your heart in the words and the way that is natural to you. You will be following the path of so many men and women in the pages of the Bible. But if you can't, please don't despair. Simply tell your heart to echo that little refrain: 'put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Saviour and my God' (*Psalms 42:5*). The time will come before long when the wellsprings of prayer and praise are released again, and you will be able to go again to the altar of God, to God, your joy and delight. 

#### about the writer

The Revd Martin Peppiatt served his curacy in central London under John Stott and then went to be in charge of a far-flung parish in the Diocese of Nakuru in Kenya, E. Africa. On return home, he was Vicar of St Stephen's, Twickenham for 26 years. 'I am married to Cynthia; we have four married children, 12 grandchildren and Jesus is our Saviour,' he says.



## Allowing God into our pain

**As we journey through life we will not escape the pain of bruised relationships, broken dreams or even mental or emotional turmoil. We may want to hide or run but the alternative is to offer our pain to Jesus who endured all pain for our sake** Sarah Griffiths writes

Naturally, we rail against anything that causes us pain, but pain is a gift from God. It's our in-built protection system and God can speak through it. The question is, 'Are we listening?'

### A Father's Heart

As parents we want our children to have the freedom to explore new things but as adults we know that some things they encounter will harm them. We tell them from an early age not to touch a hot cooker, play with sharp knives or to wander into the path of an on-coming car. Our role, as a loving and responsible parent, is to teach them that actions have consequences and that some will damage them. Our desire is to protect, but, as they grow, we need to allow them to negotiate these dangers safely so that in adulthood they will be able to master them. This is simply a reflection of how our loving Heavenly Father deals with us as His spiritual children. [continued on page 18](#) 