

The David psalms help us navigate the inevitable difficulties of life. The final set of psalms attributed to David include seven perilous journey psalms followed by a final praise psalm (Ps 138-145). These psalms correspond with the opening survival psalms (Ps 3-7) and other sets of David psalms that honestly reflect the hardships of life.

If Christ's followers were aware of how many psalms deal with the struggle of life they may not be as surprised when they fall victim to betrayal or depression or attack or disease. The challenges facing the people of God have not changed much over the years. We are still struggling saints who by the grace of God turn to God daily for his sustaining grace.

Everything we have experienced in Christ, including our new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3-5), should convince us of our need to pray the psalms. If anything the gift of the Holy Spirit ought to draw us into the psalms. The Spirit inspired David to write these psalms and the Spirit can inspire us to pray these psalms today. Living the Christian life apart from Jesus' Prayer Book is dangerously akin to living without prayer. God intends for us to embrace this resource as a daily, practical guide to following Jesus. Through the psalms we learn to depend upon Jesus.

My Cry

I cry aloud to the Lord;
 I lift up my voice to the Lord for mercy.
 I pour out before him my complaint;
 before him I tell my trouble.
 When my spirit grows faint within me,
 it is you who watch over my way.
 In the path where I walk
 people have hidden a snare for me.
 Look and see, there is no one at my right hand;
 no one is concerned for me.
 I have no refuge;
 no one cares for my life.
 I cry to you, Lord;
 I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living."
 Psalm 142:1-5

The reference to a cave in the superscription along with the psalmist's acute sense of loneliness narrows the narrative search to David's escape to the cave of Adullam (1 Sam 22:1). He had just orchestrated his escape by pretending to be insane in order to escape the Philistine king of Gath. He must have felt thrown back on his own resources and that he was running out of options. He was physically and mentally exhausted with no where to turn. Both the Israelites and the Philistines were hunting for him and wanted him dead. David's personal prayer of lament is an

act of desperation.

Such a psalm dispels any notion that we have to have our act together and our words piously arranged before we can approach God. We can begin with the straightforward cry of anguish. We can lament and give reign to our complaint. The Lord is not offended. He invites it. A corollary to this truth is that in the presence of discouraged and troubled fellow believers I have long since given up feeling the pressure to get my wording right or even my emotions right. The psalmist frees us up to begin with the “cry” and the “complaint.”

Psalm 142 critiques the counselor who is ready to judge the crier as harboring some unconfessed sin. We must be over-cautious in dismissing a believer’s lament as playing the victim. There is a form of weakness that fosters a false dependency on others and some people cling to their weakness as their own personal claim to significance, a merit badge inviting attention and sympathy. But we must be careful to hear our brother or sister’s lament without snap-judgments and emotional pet peeves. The psalms give voice to all those who are deeply afflicted and emotionally distraught. We are challenged not to respond to a troubled soul with insensitivity and hardness of heart. The very loneliness felt so keenly by the psalmist can be exasperated by friends who cannot tolerate the psalmist’s prayer, “I cry aloud to the Lord.”

Deep in the cave, David can afford to be loud – real loud. There is no one to hear him but the Lord. The listening subject of our lament is profoundly important. If it is to the wind, that’s despair; if it’s to the stranger in the crowd, that’s foolish; if it’s to the Lord (and to his people), that’s wisdom. The repeated emphasis of the psalm drives this truth home. The psalmist cries out to the Lord. He lifts his voice to the Lord for mercy and pours out his complaint before him, “before him I tell my trouble.”

In his memorable voice, Louis Armstrong intones the old spiritual, “*Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen; nobody knows my sorrows . . . Nobody knows, but Jesus.*” Trouble is an inescapable fact of life. As one of Job’s unfriendly friends famously said, “Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward” (5:7). Trouble is universal and pervasive. It touches all of our lives deeply and personally. Each of us seems to have our own original experience of trouble that no one else can share. We agree: “nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.” And sometimes we cherish the lament that is uniquely our own. Trouble is trouble, but nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen; nobody knows *my* sorrows.¹ His loneliness leads him close to despair. He is bereft of friends and family, comrades and companions, but he still knows deep down that “it is You who watch over my way.” The people he is aware of are out to get him. “In the path where I walk people have hidden a snare for me” (Ps 142:3). The hidden snare is a repeated theme in these perilous journey psalms (Ps 140:5; 141:8).

The psalmist knows the Lord watches over his way, but he still feels alone. We sense his despair. This is how he feels in his heart, “I have no refuge; no one cares for my life.” But he knows that the Lord is there for him, “I cry to you, Lord; I say, ‘You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.’” On the surface the juxtaposition of statements may seem confusing and contradictory.

¹ Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 1.

If you are overhearing the psalmist you may be inclined to ask, “Are you looking to the Lord as your refuge or not?!” It is important for us to hear others express their devotion and their discouragement, maybe even their despair, and hold their convictions in tension. The fear of loneliness does not cancel out the deep devotion and the deep devotion does not dispel the discouragement. We can lament the loneliness, and boldly say *before the Lord*, “no one cares for my life.”

This psalm deserves to be better understood and prayed more often because it honors the soul of the troubled believer. It gives real validity to our discouragement without easy, pious retorts that spiritualize our pain and leave us even more isolated. This is a great single’s prayer. The devoted disciple of Jesus Christ who cries out to the Lord and yet has found no husband or wife to share their life together. This is a great prayer for the home bound older person who loves the Lord but has never felt as lonely as they do now. In so many ways we can truly identify with David in the cave and pray Psalm 142.

Free Me From My Prison

Listen to my cry,
for I am in desperate need;
rescue me from those who pursue me,
for they are too strong for me.
Set me free from my prison,
that I may praise your name.
Then the righteous will gather about me
because of your goodness to me.
Psalm 142:6-7

Prayer does not always bring immediate relief, but it often sharpens the request and clarifies the hope. In this last section David’s tone is desperate. His plea is a cry. He needs to be rescued. His enemies are breathing down his neck and he has no where to run to. Whether it is his circumstances or the cave itself, he likens his predicament to a prison, a metaphor for his hopeless, frustrating and dangerous situation. “Prison” may represent any number of circumstances that conspire to lock us up and close us down. David shows us how to pray against the evil. His motivation is evangelistic, “that I may praise your name,” and his expectation is hopeful, “then the righteous will gather around me.” David trusts in the goodness of the Lord.

The cave of Adullam proved to be a turning point in David’s life. The relational blessing that he envisioned came to fruition. The Samuel narrative reports: “When his brothers and his father’s household heard about it [David’s escape to the cave], they went down to him there. All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered about him, and he became their commander. About four hundred men were with him” (1 Sam 22:1-2). In the psalm, David says, “the righteous will gather about me,” but the narrative account describes the group as distressed, in debt, and discontent. Hardly, a promising group from which to build an army, but Eugene Peterson urges us to see “David’s morally and socially ragtag band as the embryonic holy people

of God.”² As with David in the wilderness, the people God forms into community need saving. It can be said of them: “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:10). God took a group of misfits and forged an army. They were not righteous; they were made righteous by the grace of God. And they were drawn to David because of God’s goodness to him. The whole scene corresponds to the words of the Son of David when he said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

² Eugene H. Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall*, San Francisco, Harper, 1997, 95.