

## (3) Anxiety

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Preacher: Bruce Gardiner

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Our reading this morning is from Psalm 55 and that can be found on page 570 of the Church Bibles. Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy.

Attend to me and answer me. I am restless in my complaint and I moan, because of the noise of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked. For they drop trouble upon me and in anger they bear a grudge against me.

My heart is in anguish within me. The terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me and horror overwhelms me.

And I say, O that I had wings like a dove, I would fly away and be at rest. Yes, I would wander far away. I would lodge in the wilderness. I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest.

Destroy, O Lord, divide their tongues, for I see violence and strife in the city. Day and night they go round it on its walls, and iniquity and trouble are within it.

[ 1 : 1 1 ] Ruin is in its midst. Oppression and fraud do not depart from its marketplace. For it is not an enemy who taunts me, then I could bear it.

It is not an adversary who deals insolently with me, then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend.

We used to take sweet counsel together. Within God's house we walked in the throng. Let death steal over them. Let them go down to Sheol alive.

For evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart. But I call to God, and the Lord will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.

He redeems my soul in safety from the battle that I wage, for many are arrayed against me. God will give ear and humble them, who is enthroned from of old, because they do not change and do not fear God.

[ 2 : 1 7 ] My companion stretched out his hand against his friends. He violated his covenant. His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart. His words were softer than oil, yet they drew swords.

Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you. He will never permit the righteous to be moved. But you, O God, will cast them down into the pit of destruction.

Men of blood and treachery will not live out half their days, but I will trust in you. Well, good morning. Do keep your Bibles open, if you would, at page 570, Psalm 55.

And at the end of the sermon, there will be an opportunity to ask questions. So if there's anything you'd like to ask, I'll do my best to answer them at the end. But as we start, let's pray together and ask for God's help.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this psalm. Thank you for preserving it for us. Please, would you use it this morning to strengthen us, to encourage us, and to help us to depend on you.

[ 3 : 2 6 ] In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen. Well, let me start with a question. It's the question that's printed on the back of the service sheet, at the top of the outline, which you may find of assistance.

When you're anxious, how do you cope? Not if you're anxious, how do you cope? But when you're anxious, how do you cope? After all, there are always plenty of reasons to be anxious.

And I'm sure that none of us could say that we're always anxiety-free zones. Financial pressures. Family pressures. Health issues. When you're at work, how do you cope with unjustified criticism from your boss?

Or backstabbing behaviour from a colleague? At home, how do you cope with unfair treatment from a family member? Or from a flatmate? Maybe there are particular burdens which are weighing you down right now.

Or maybe you're just back from a wonderful holiday and have not a care in the world, but you do remember times of particular anxiety in the past. So when you're anxious, how do you cope? [ 4 : 37 ] For some of us, I guess, the honest answer is, I don't cope. The pressure of a particular problem is so acute, it feels totally crushing. So great is the burden.

We try to cope in our own strength and find ourselves totally powerless to deal with the pressure, still less, to solve the problem. For others here, the way to cope is to pour out our feelings on a close friend or perhaps a family member.

Well, imagine for a moment you're living not in London, but in Jerusalem, and not in the 21st century, but in the 9th century BC.

You're listening to a song written by David. That's King David rather than Craig David. The lyrics are very personal and full of emotion. He's clearly deeply distressed, fearful and even angry.

And yet by the end of the song, the mood has changed. He sees his problems in a new light and has a renewed confidence. Suddenly he's addressing you, the listener, personally in the words of verse 22.

[ 5 : 46 ] Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you. You see, that's David's answer to the question with which we started. It's not an answer learnt in some theological school, but in the school of life, tried and tested through personal troubles and pressures.

And Psalm 55 shows us how he's got to that answer. The first half shows us David casting his burdens on the Lord in prayer. And the second half shows us his confidence that the Lord will sustain him despite his burdens.

So what of David's burden? Look at verses 4 and 5. His fear is so great and his terror so acute that a doctor might describe it as a panic attack.

He can't cope anymore and he longs to escape. Look at verse 5. And I say, oh that I had wings like a dove, I would fly away and be at rest.

Yes, I would wander far away. I would lodge in the wilderness. I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest. Isn't it so real?

[ 7 : 10 ] How many times do we just want to run away from a particular problem? The last time I actually ran away was at about the age of 8, when my parents had been particularly annoying.

No doubt by being far too sensible. And I'm sure it was for my own good. And I was back at home within the hour. Well, as adults we can get away from a problem, perhaps by taking a holiday for a week or two.

But then we return. And generally the problem returns. And for David too, running away was a real feeling. But not a realistic solution. Now we don't know what particular pressure has been prompting this extreme fear.

We're not told clearly, but we are given some clues. In verses 9 to 11, we see enemies are overrunning the city, bringing violence and strife and turning the marketplace into a place of oppression and fraud.

This must be Jerusalem, the very city from where David ruled over the people of Israel. So it was a very public problem. One which went to the heart of his professional responsibilities and his royal role.

[ 8 : 20 ] But it's also a very personal problem. Look at verses 12 and 13. It seems David has been betrayed by somebody he's been very close to.

Someone with whom he shared matters of faith as they walked together in the temple. For David, it's devastating to find the trust he's invested in a close friendship being abused in this way.

So for David, there's a professional problem with a very personal dimension. There's a problem with enemies and there's a problem with a close friend. And there's another potential problem.

His attitude to what's going on. You see, not only does he want to be delivered from his problems, but he wants his enemies to be destroyed. Look at verse 9.

Destroy, O Lord. Divide their tongues. And verse 15. Let death steal over them. Let them go down to Sheol alive.

[ 9 : 48 ] Sheol was the place where the dead were thought to live. No wonder the combined weight of this burden seems to be crushing him. So faced with this burden, what does David do?

He casts this burden on the Lord in prayer. Look at verse 1. Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy.

Attend to me and answer me. I am restless in my complaint, and I moan. The first 15 verses of Psalm 55 are all addressed to God in prayer.

It's easy to forget this, given the candid way in which David expresses himself. But David is unburdening himself to God. Notice first, he's totally direct.

Give ear to my prayers. Hide not yourself. Attend to me. Answer me. He doesn't use a particular religious formula or format. He doesn't feel duty-bound to start by praising God, then confessing his sin, then thanking God for his forgiveness, and then as politely as possible, asking God for his help.

[10:56] Of course, if it's God's will. No, he's got a real relationship with God, and he really needs help. So he asks for it. Directly. Urgently. Repeatedly.

Notice second, that he's totally honest about how he feels. Verse 2. I am restless and I moan. Verse 5. Horror overwhelms me.

He's not dressed up his language to make it more attractive to God. He may have a God-given responsibility to rule over Jerusalem, but frankly, he admits he wants to run away.

He's so unhappy, he's moaning, but he tells God that he's moaning. He takes his feelings as they are, and he offloads them onto God.

And notice thirdly, that he's totally honest about everything he feels. He wants his enemies to be destroyed, and he could have chosen not to mention it.

[11:54] But he admits even this to God. He doesn't hide from God what he wants to happen to those who are causing him this trouble. So direct, honest, and totally frank.

And in verse 22, he's inviting us to do the same. The focus shifts from David's burden to our burdens. Just as David has cast his burden on the Lord, so we are to do the same.

In fact, verse 22 is not an invitation, but a command. It doesn't say, if you cast your burden on the Lord, he will sustain you, but cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you.

In the same way, we're to do it. Directly. Honestly. Fully. So let me ask you, how direct are your prayers for help? Do you run to your heavenly Father in the same way a child in distress runs to her mother?

How honest are your prayers for help? Do you tell God what you really feel? Or do you edit out those feelings you think that God doesn't want to hear about? You see, this psalm shows us there's no place for the mustn't grumble approach to prayer.

[13:09] How full and frank are your prayers? Do you tell God the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Or do you keep back from God those feelings you don't feel too proud about?

So what might this look like in practice? Well, here's a particular prayer you might be praying in a particular situation. God, help me now. Help me quickly. I'm panicking about my exam tomorrow. I really hate my job and the boss who's asked me to sit this exam. I just wish I could run away. I know I haven't done enough work, but the children have been up half the night and I'm really tired and grumpy. Help me and help me now.

Amen. Well, next time you're anxious, why not try it? Because if we cast our burdens on the Lord, the promise is that the Lord will sustain us.

One of my great joys is our four-year-old daughter Lydia. She's often delightful, but sometimes her spirited behaviour and stubborn streak have caused Catherine and me a little anxiety.

[14:14] One of her great joys is her daddy reading her bedtime stories. She particularly enjoys a little game we play where I will start the sentence and she will try to finish it.

Now, if she was playing this game with verse 22 and I'd read out the words cast your burden on the Lord, she'd probably have finished it and he will take it away.

Because that's what you'd expect, isn't it? But instead, the verse finishes and he will sustain you. So we need to be clear, this isn't a promise that Christians will be free from anxiety-inducing pressures if they only cast their burdens on the Lord in prayer.

In verse 18, we see this wasn't the case for David. Although he feels his soul has been redeemed, the battle continues. It's the present tense that's used. And in verse 20, his companion continues to plot against him.

But whereas before, David's problems were unbearable, by the end of the psalm, they seem to have become bearable. Well, how has that happened? How has he been sustained by God?

[15:27] In verses 16 to 23, David gives us three reasons why he's sustained by God. Firstly, God hears. Verse 17, David is totally confident that God is listening whenever he prays and whatever he prays.

So he's not wasting his time in pouring out his heart to God. David may well have confided in his companion with whom he used to take sweet counsel. But now, that person has turned against him. We may share a problem with a friend, but can we be sure they will always be there for us, whatever the time, whatever the problem. But God is there, and he hears us.

You see, our prayer to God is not like leaving a phone message for a frantically overworked city lawyer, and we've got no idea when he'll get the message or have time to listen to it. Rather, it's as if God is always carrying the latest Nokia phone.

It's always got a good reception. It's never engaged, and God's just waiting for our call. God loves to hear about all our worries. Secondly, God rules.

[16:52] Verse 19, he who is enthroned from of old, or as the New International Version translation puts it, he who is enthroned forever. It's God's world.

God's world. He's in charge. He created us, and he sustains us. He's ultimately more powerful than all our enemies and all our problems.

President Bush may rule over the richest nation on earth, but he's powerless to stop the fighting in Iraq. But for the true ruler of the world, the nations are like a drop of water in a bucket.

And when it comes to our particular problems, God is not like Superman, confronted by kryptonite, sapped of strength, and powerless to intervene.

So in praying to God, we're speaking to somebody who can fully deal with the problem, whatever it is. And because God rules, we can be confident that he's in control, however out of control things may seem to us.

[17:56] And thirdly, God will act because God has acted. God has acted in judgment in the past.

He acted in judgment to stop the building of the idolatrous Tower of Babel by causing the people to speak in different languages. An event probably alluded to in verse 9 when David asked that the tongues of his enemies would be divided.

He acted in judgment when the ground opened up and swallowed Korah, Dathan, and Ibiram who were challenging Moses' God-given responsibility to lead God's people.

An event referred to in verse 15. And because David knows his Bible, he knows that God will act in judgment on all those who do not change and do not fear God.

Verse 19, God will give ear and humble them, he who is enthroned from old, because they do not change, and do not fear God.

[18:59] And he will act to save his people. As David reflects on God's character, he's confident that the Lord will save him. Verse 16, I call to God and the Lord will save me.

We too can be confident that we will be saved, perhaps not immediately or not physically, but in the way that ultimately matters. Because ultimately, we have a king descended from David who suffered at the hands of his enemies, who was betrayed by a close friend in whom he confided. Our king was so burdened that he said, my soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Yet you turn to God in urgent, anguished prayer, longing for the burden to be removed, but entrusting himself to God's will.

Our king, Jesus Christ. And that burden was God's righteous judgment at our rebellion against him, which Jesus bore for us in his death on the cross.

At the moment of his death, he cried out, it is finished, a cry not of despair, but of victory. In Jesus' death, our greatest burden has been cast on God himself so we can be confident that ultimately we will bear no more burdens.

[20:22] If we trust in Jesus, we will be with God in heaven. And verse 4 of Revelation chapter 21 tells us what that will be like, that he will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning or crying or pain anymore for the former things have passed away. Well, back in Psalm 55, maybe you're somebody here today for whom the words of verse 19 are true, if you're honest.

Someone of whom it could be said, you do not change and do not fear God. If that's you, may I urge you, don't ultimately be humbled by God, but cast the burden of your sin on Jesus Christ in repentance and faith so you can be confident of an eternity without a single burden.

But if you're already trusting in Jesus' death for you, are you casting all your daily burdens on the Lord? Well, if so, then God promises you will be sustained.

As we finish, how does that work in practice? Well, picture it like making a 999 call. Often our prayers in times of crisis are urgent requests asking for the fire brigade to arrive immediately and put out the particular fire causing us to be anxious.

[ 21 : 49 ] And God welcomes that kind of prayer as we've seen. He takes our call. He can act and he will act. He may send the fire brigade immediately, but he may not.

But because there will be ultimate justice for those who wrong us, who do not change and do not fear God, it's as if in his perfect timing he will send the police service to catch the culprits. And because Jesus' death and resurrection shows us we will be safe with God forever, it's as if he will send the ambulance service in his perfect timing. The God who takes our emergency call is totally in control and he knows what's best.

So having made the call, having cast our burdens on the Lord, we can trust he will respond fully and fairly. We can rest with David on the last six words in the psalm, verse 23, but I will trust in you. Let's pray together. Father, we praise and thank you that you want us to cast all our burdens on you.

[ 23 : 05 ] Please forgive us when we fail to do so and help us cry out to you honestly and fully next time we're anxious. And we pray for those here this morning or known to us who are bearing particular burdens.

Please would they turn to you in prayer and please would you sustain them. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.