

Praying in times of suffering

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Preacher: Rev Dave Brown

[0:00] So, the next in our series looking at a Christian view of suffering, today we're thinking about praying whilst suffering.! We're going to be largely in Psalm 88, so do open that up. You'll find that on page 597. That would be helpful to have that in front of you.

It's not often we sing mournful songs anymore, is it? To be honest, most of the funerals I take these days are full of joy and cheerful songs.

We sing all things bright and beautiful and songs about the love and care of the person who's died. We don't sing mournful songs. I was trying to rack my brains as to whether there'd ever been some really mournful songs that have got to the top of the charts.

A few years ago, R.E.M. had a song called Everybody Hurts. I don't know whether you remember that. That often sets me off. But partly because it reminds me of something from a very long time ago and it triggers that in my mind.

The Smiths had a song called Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now. That's a real cheerful one. But it's such a... I mean, Morrissey was such a gloomy character and his lyrics were interesting that it was more comic than sad.

[1:13] That maybe you're old enough to remember the Live Aid concert and the moment during the evening when the donations started to drop off and they put on the song by the cars called Drive, Who's Gonna Drive You Home Tonight?

But it wasn't so much the lyrics and the music as the pictures of people not worrying who was going to drive them home but whether they were going to live another day. It was the pictures that did the damage there.

But in Psalm 88 we have a truly mournful song. But it is a psalm and a song that you'll note from the subscript at the top under the psalm heading.

It's meant to be sung corporately. And if you look at the heading underneath the title of the psalm, it says that the tune that it's supposed to be sung to is called the Suffering of Affliction.

It doesn't really sound much like a toe-tapper, does it? Something to get your heart racing. And yet, here it is in the Bible, a song to be used for corporate worship that is unlike anything else we have ever sung together.

[2:18] But it is a psalm that has a lot to teach us. Now our focus today is thinking about how we might pray in the midst of times of intense suffering. But before we get to some practical pointers that this psalm has to teach us, I want us to look at the psalm more closely and see the depth of the pain and struggle that the psalmist has.

Let me just point three things out for you. Firstly, the depth and extent of his suffering is overwhelming. It is overwhelming. I wonder if you noticed that as it was read to you.

There are plenty of psalms that speak about suffering and trouble and grief. But unlike any other psalm in the Psalter, this one ends with gloom and without any sense of hope.

Literally, the Hebrew in the last verse translates like this. You have removed from me my loved ones and my neighbour, my friends. Utter darkness. It's a cry of desolation at the end.

The writer of Psalm 88 is overwhelmed with troubles, verse 3. Literally, it means he is sated, he is full to bursting. Like someone who's eaten far too much, he cannot fit any more in.

[3:27] That's how many troubles this man has had. It's a weight too heavy for him to carry, verse 7. The image at the end of that verse is of a person standing in the sea being battered by wave after wave after wave, knocking him off his feet again and again and again.

He speaks of his loneliness, verse 8. His closest friends now find him repulsive. There is no comfort to be found from them and he feels just as distant from God as well.

His sufferings have taken him, verse 6, to the lowest pit and the darkest depths. He is as good as dead. Even though he knows he's still alive, it is by the skin of his teeth.

Verses 4 and 5. He has no strength left to fight his way out. He says the same thing at the end of verse 8. I am confined and I cannot escape.

Overwhelmed, close to death, oppressed, weak, abandoned, lonely, crushed, helpless, surrounded by terrors, with darkness as his closest friends. The imagery here is of a depth and level of suffering that is off the scale, seemingly without any kind of end.

[4 : 38] He's in a terrible state, isn't he? But there are two other things in this psalm that make his situation far harder to bear.

The first is that the psalmist sees the hand of God behind his suffering. It's impossible to read this psalm and not see where the psalmist's finger is pointing as to the source of his suffering.

He's not accusing an evil regime or wicked person. He's not saying, oh, it's all my own fault because I've been sinful or foolish. He's not bemoaning his misfortune at living in such difficult times.

His finger is pointing straight at the Lord as the one who was caused, or at the very least allowed this suffering to come on him. Now, we don't know to what extent that is true.

In the book of Job, we're given a glimpse behind the curtains, aren't we, to see why the suffering is coming on Job. We don't have that here, but the psalmist clearly holds the Lord accountable for his trouble.

[5 : 38] You see that in verse 6. The psalmist says that the Lord himself has put him in the lowest pit and the darkest depths. You put me there, he says. That carries on throughout the rest of the psalm.

Verse 7. It is the Lord's wrath that lies heavily on him. The psalmist is overwhelmed by the Lord's waves. Verse 8. God has taken away his closest friends and confined him to a place from which he cannot escape.

God's wrath gets mentioned again in verse 16. The psalmist goes on to say that it is the Lord's terrors that have destroyed him. And who is the one who has taken away his closest friends and left him in abject darkness?

Well, the psalmist says it's God himself who has done it. We might wonder then why the psalmist is even crying out to God when it's the Lord himself who he sees behind all his troubles.

We'll get to that later. But like Job, the psalmist sees the Lord's own hands behind his struggles. For the writer of Psalm 88, the Lord has been a very rough shepherd.

[6 : 45] But there's something else that makes the situation, if it could be worse, even worse, even more painful. And that's the extra pain caused by what seems to be unanswered prayer.

The whole psalm is a prayer, isn't it? From verse 1 to verse 18, everything the psalmist says is directed to God. But although the psalmist is crying out day and night, verse 1, every day, verse 9, it feels as if the Lord has closed his ears to the psalmist's cries for help.

Verse 14, why, Lord, do you reject me? Why do you hide your face from me? The psalmist has been praying and praying and praying, calling out to God again and again and again, day after day, night after night, and yet his situation has not changed.

His prayers don't seem to have any effect. The psalmist even tries challenging God in his prayers. That's what we're getting in verses 10 and 12. Six rhetorical questions.

Trying to draw God out to act in a way so that the psalmist can sing a song of praise and not a song of lament. He said, what good am I to you if I die, Lord? I can't praise you if I'm dead.

[7 : 57] Do something. But even that reaps no remnant. Hard not to feel desperately sad for the psalmist, isn't it?

The depth and extent of the suffering is overwhelming. He sees the hand of the Lord behind everything he's going through. And although he is faithful in bringing his prayers and requests to God in prayer, nothing changes.

His one and only source of hope, of a way out, seems like a dried up well in a time of drought. Or to use the image he chooses, it feels like being in the midst of a dark storm, battered by waves again and again, and there is no glimpse of light on the horizon.

No sign of anything coming to an end. Maybe you can identify with the feelings of the psalmist. Maybe from a time in the past, maybe even now you think, actually, this describes where I am.

Maybe you know how it feels to be just as low, as crushed, as weak, as helpless as the psalmist here. Maybe the warmer days and the beautiful blue sky have done nothing to lift you from that pit of despair, those darkest depths, where God is distant and darkness is your closest friend.

[9 : 17] Maybe that's how you feel right now. Certainly possible for a Christian to feel like that and to experience times like this. After all, that's where we started our series in suffering, wasn't it?

Acknowledging that we live in a world where everybody suffers, and sometimes where greater suffering comes to those who are seeking to live God's way. In this world, some people suffer far more than others, and sometimes in ways and for lengths of time that we would find almost impossible to bear ourselves, just like the writer of this psalm.

I think that's one of the reasons why Psalm 88 is in the Scriptures. We're meant to find the writer's brutal honesty helpful, so that we know that if we find ourselves feeling like that, we're not the only one.

Someone else has been there before us. It helps us to know that we're not alone feeling like this, that it's okay to feel like this. It's that it's even okay to express our feelings if this is how we feel inside.

But more than that, the psalm and those like these are there to give us a pattern to follow if ever we find ourselves in a similar situation. Psalm 8 is there to help us know how to pray in times of suffering.

[10 : 39] So let me highlight three principles that I think this psalm teaches us in how we might pray if we ever find ourselves in times like this. Here's the first one. Remember who God is and what he has already done.

That's what the psalmist does, isn't it? That's how he begins in verse 1. He remembers who God is. Verse 1. Lord, you are the God who saves me. He starts off by using God's covenant name. Yahweh, the Lord. The name given to God's people. The name given to those with whom God has made himself known. Those he has a relationship with. Now as Christians we can go further than that, can't we?

We know that the Lord is our Father. Because Jesus teaches us how to pray like that. We know that Jesus is our elder brother. We know that God's Spirit is our Spirit.

The Comforter is God in us. In our suffering we know that we can throw ourselves onto the lap of our loving Heavenly Father and weep and wail and know that we are safe and loved as we do so.

[11 : 48] He also reminds himself though that God is God. God is sovereign over his world. He's the one in charge, not the psalmist. That's a helpful reminder, I think.

We are not God. We cannot change situations very often. We do not know the future, certainly. But God does know. He is in charge.

And it's right that we acknowledge our place before him and be humble before him. The last thing he picks up in verse 1 is that he speaks of God as the one who saves. Might be that the psalmist is remembering a time where God has acted in his own life and brought his saving power to bear.

Or maybe he's looking back to the saving of God's people from slavery in Egypt, bringing them into the Promised Land. Either way, how the psalmist addresses God here is a model for us.

In our suffering we must remember that we are praying to the sovereign God who rules his world, one who loves us deeply and who has saved us at the cost of his own son.

[12 : 56] Secondly, we are to keep talking to God even if it feels that he is not listening. Despite how overwhelmingly bleak, dark and hard his times, the psalmist keeps talking to God, doesn't he?

He prays day, night and night time. Day after day. His prayers are a constant feature in his life. Like Job, the sufferings of the psalmist didn't drive him away from God, but he drove him to the Lord.

I think I quoted this a couple of weeks ago, but it's worth saying again. In a letter to one of his suffering parishioners, John Newton wrote this. See what he's saying there?

It may feel as if your prayers are going unanswered. But if you turn away, you can be sure that wherever you look for comfort, there will be none there. There will be comfort in prayer.

So keep going. That's what he's saying. So even if it feels as if our prayers accomplish nothing, we are not to stop. We are to keep going. We're to let every prayer be an expression of our trust in God.

[14 : 17] Let every prayer be an expression of the hope that things can change because God can change them. And as another day goes by and another day and nothing seems to change, well, the advice here is to pray again and to keep praying.

That's what the psalmist does. And as he does that, he is grounding himself in the hope that only God can bring. I mentioned earlier the brutal honesty of the psalmist.

And it's okay to pray like that. There's no need to hide our feelings from God, is there? He knows them all already. Who do we think we're kidding? Now, we have no way of knowing whether the psalmist was right about his diagnosis of his situation.

But at the end of the book, Job is commended by the Lord for bringing his prayers to God. He's commended for his honesty. So that's something we can do as well.

After all, isn't that something that we would hope that someone that we love, if they were struggling, that they would do for us? That they would be honest about their difficulties and their pain and their struggles?

[15:24] Wouldn't we want them to be honest about it? Well, surely our Heavenly Father feels the same about us. We can be brutally honest. When we're going through times like the psalmist here, being right or wrong in our diagnosis isn't as important as talking to God honestly about our experience.

Now, it might be very uncomfortable for us to sit and listen to someone else who is praying like this. And if that ever happens, we need to resist the temptation to be one of Job's miserable comforters. You know, the ones who listen and say, Oh yeah, it's all your own fault. Or to offer simple little platitudes. We mustn't do that. Honesty is vital. And the best response to a friend speaking, praying like this, is to sit and wait and to pray and grieve with them.

And to keep encouraging them to pray such honest prayers as they wait for God to answer. We're to keep praying. Thirdly, we're to keep trusting in God, even if it seems as if God is behind it all. As I said, every prayer that we pray is an expression of our trust in God. Trusting that he is good, that he is listening, and that he does have the power and authority to act.

[16:45] Because that is the God we see in the scriptures, isn't it? A God who is worthy of our trust and praise, no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in. And it's the knowledge of God's sovereignty, of his righteous character, of his grace and mercy and love for his people, that means the psalmist can keep trusting God, even if it seems that God is behind it all, because he is the ultimate cause.

See, the psalmist knows what God is like. And by bringing to mind his character, he is able to keep trusting in God, knowing that God can and will act for his ultimate blessing, even if that isn't the case right now, or it doesn't seem to be the case right now.

Of course, his current situation stinks. It is overwhelming, almost intolerable. And yet God hasn't changed. The psalmist knows that. God is still God.

His ways are not on our ways. And so the psalmist continues to pray, because he is, and as he do say, trusting in God that one day, God's purposes will work their way out.

That things will seem to be both for the glory of God and for those who love him. That will be our focus next Sunday. But that's why he keeps trusting in God.

[18:02] Even at the same time, he is saying, Lord, you've caused this. In our suffering and our grief, we need to do the same. To remember that God is still God, and that ultimately his ways are good, because then we can actively place our trust in him, even if we have no idea at all why God is allowing us to go through such times as this.

Three principles then for praying in times of suffering. We're to remember who God is and what he has already done for us. We are to keep talking to God, even if it feels that he is not listening. And we are to keep trusting in God, even if it seems that he is the cause. Well, as I close, I want to take us briefly to Matthew chapter 7.

So do turn over to that, because there we see Jesus actually saying pretty much the same things. So firstly, there is the command of Jesus to keep praying. What does he say?

Ask, seek, knock. We're not always very good at that, are we? Sometimes when trouble or hardship comes, we go, stuff this.

[19:17] If you're not doing what I want, Lord, then I'm going to turn my back on you. What a foolish thing to do. God's timing is not ours. When suffering comes, we are not to give up, but we are to pray and to keep praying, however long and hard it may be.

Sometimes prayer needs to be accompanied by active obedience. There's a sense of activity in these verses as well. Seeking, not just with words, but maybe practically. But those activities must be rooted and grounded in faithful prayer.

Keeping on asking, keeping seeking, keeping knocking until the Lord answers. Incidentally, of course, it's often in the waiting and the patient endurance that the Lord teaches us the most valuable lessons of our faith and glorifies and deepens our faith further.

That won't happen if we cease to pray. Secondly, Jesus encourages us with a promise that prayer does change things. Did you notice that?

What happens? Those who seek, find. those who knock, be it forever so long, have doors open. Those who ask, do, receive.

[20 : 31] Prayer changes things. God does here and he will act, but remember, what we ask for may not necessarily be the thing that we receive. Because very often the things that we ask for aren't the things that are really good for us.

Those of you that are parents or grandparents will know that. please can I have vast amounts of sugar, far too much chocolate. Please can I stay up till three in the morning.

No, it's not good for you. There is something else. Tim Keller puts that much better. He says this, God always gives us what we would have asked for in prayer if we had known everything that he knows.

God always gives us what we would have asked for in prayer if we had known everything that he knows. The psalmist kept praying even though nothing seemed to change because he knew that in God's good time God would answer.

And Jesus teaches us that as well. He also makes one final point. He gives his disciples a reminder of God's fatherly goodness. How is God described in these verses?

[21 : 39] As a father who gives good gifts to his children. That's sometimes hard to see or maybe even to remember at the times of deep and prolonged suffering.

But it is true. God is good. And ultimately all that God does will be shown to have been good. And wonderfully, you and I are in a far better place to see that than the psalmist in Psalm 88.

We know so many more things about the character and work of God that the psalmist didn't. If we look to the New Testament we see the life and work and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus who gave his life to save us.

And we know that God is good. And we know that he can work through terrible injustice and gross suffering. We'll think more on that on Good Friday.

Reflecting how Jesus experienced the darkness far deeper and a suffering far greater than anything we might experience in this world. And yet it was through that experience that God worked the greatest good.

[22 : 49] Bringing light and hope and forgiveness and eternal life to all who ask. Of course we need to be honest with one another and acknowledge that some prayers are not answered this side of glory.

But our eternal hope should not keep us from praying. It should keep us praying. Not just because God does and can sometimes still answer our prayers in dramatic wonderful spectacular ways but because we know that one day those prayers will be answered.

One day all the cries of our heart will come before the Lord and be fulfilled. One day all our tears will be dried. One day all our suffering will be done away with forever.

In that day our joy and our peace will know no bounds. and until then God we should pray without ceasing with brutal honesty if that's needed but with hope and confidence because we do have a loving God a gracious Father who understands our suffering and who does hear and answer our prayers.

May we keep going however rough the road. Amen. Amen. Thank you.