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Songs of the Spirit | Using the Psalms to Connect With God

Suffering

Psalm 86

June 3, 2018

Incline Your ear, O LORD, and answer me; For I am afflicted and needy. Preserve my soul, for I am a godly man; O You my God, save Your servant who trusts in You. Be gracious to me, O Lord, For to You I cry all day long. Make glad the soul of Your servant, For to You, O Lord, I lift up my soul. For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You. Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; And give heed to the voice of my supplications! In the day of my trouble I shall call upon You, For You will answer me.

There is no one like You among the gods, O Lord, Nor are there any works like Yours. All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, And they shall glorify Your name. For You are great and do wondrous deeds; You alone are God.

Teach me Your way, O LORD; I will walk in Your truth; Unite my heart to fear Your name. I will give thanks to You, O Lord my God, with all my heart, And will glorify Your name forever. For Your lovingkindness toward me is great, And You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol. O God, arrogant men have risen up against me, And a band of violent men have sought my life, And they have not set You before them. But You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth. Turn to me, and be gracious to me; Oh grant Your strength to Your servant, And save the son of Your handmaid. Show me a sign for good, That those who hate me may see it and be ashamed, Because You, O LORD, have helped me and comforted me.

We're looking at ten themes in the Book of Psalms and I HOPE you're taking this opportunity to sort of explore the Psalms... maybe USE some of the resources we've suggested...

Today we look at a very common theme in the Book of Psalms... We've already touched on it as it comes up in most of the 150 psalms and you can hardly avoid it even if you wanted to – the theme of suffering...pain...trouble...opposition.

Sometimes the source of the trouble/suffering is specified – often it comes from other people (and that'll be its own theme – Enemies – on Fathers' Day...hmmm). Sometimes the source of the suffering/pain is from our own selves (we can be our OWN worst enemy – we hope to explore THAT theme NEXT WEEK). And sometimes the source of difficulty/trouble is NOT specified... That's the case in this 86thPsalm (at least at the start).

Today we look at a believer in TROUBLE and how he prays in the midst of the suffering and we find a kind of X-Factor right in the middle of his prayer...the core of the prayer... the first part leads to it and

the second part of the prayer flows from it. The Psalm is pretty clearly in three parts (and certainly lends itself to a three-point sermon - imagine that!)

So let's look at a believer praying in the midst of trouble...and how the core of his prayer (like the core of the Earth or the Sun) has a kind of energy in it...and has the power to transform trouble into character and depth and moral/spiritual beauty in the suffering person.

The three points of this three-part prayer are: 1. Prayer in Suffering 2. The Core of Transformational Prayer 3. The Practice of Transformational Suffering. Let's get into it.

There was an article in the April issue of Christianity Today about one of the most iconic photographs of the 20th Century... a photo that horrified the whole world, a group of five Vietnamese children running away from a burning village. The nine-year-old girl in the middle is now in her 50s and she wrote the article (like a whatever happened to so-and-so article). It begins with the words:

"You have seen my picture a thousand times. It's a picture that made the world gasp—a picture that defined my life. I am nine years old, running along a puddled roadway in front of an expressionless soldier, arms outstretched, naked, shrieking in pain and fear, the dark contour of a napalm cloud billowing in the distance."

The title of the article by "Kim" (can't pronounce last name) is titled, "These Bombs Brought Me to Christ." In the article, Kim says that she is still, 40 years later, still getting treatments for the napalm burns that covered her arms, back and neck.

But she tells how in 1982 in a little church in Saigon she heard, on Christmas Eve, the simple story of why Jesus Christ came and what He accomplished by His life, death and resurrection and Kim believed. She looks back on the change in her life and thinking:

"I will never forget the horrors of that day—the bombs, the fire, the shrieks, the fear. Nor will I forget the years of trial and torment that followed. But when I think about how far I have come—the freedom and peace that comes from faith in Jesus—I realize there is nothing greater or more powerful than the love of our blessed Savior. My faith in Jesus has enabled me to forgive those who have hurt and scarred me. It has enabled me to pray for my enemies rather than curse them. And it has enabled me not just to tolerate them but truly to love them."

And that's the question we're asking today: how can trouble and pain become a redemptive instrument...not something we just sort of "get over" but that transforms us and shapes us for good?

Sometimes the suffering is extreme...as it was for our Vietnamese sister, Kim. Sometimes there's profound trauma - a life-changing injury/abuse with long-range repercussions or loss or the death of a loved-one. Sometimes (as we saw a few weeks ago in the 22nd Psalm) there's utter despair where the sufferer feels totally alone and feels forsaken EVEN by God ("Why have You forsaken Me?").

But other times... it's just a low-level sense of unhappiness or loneliness (you may know Britain recently established a new cabinet position, Minister of Loneliness – a big problem!).

Sometimes the sufferer doesn't even know WHY he/she feels troubled: it's just that something isn't right and there's a sense of un-ease. Sometimes the "thorns and thistles" of this Fallen World just seem to be poking you at every turn... and a thousand little difficulties and frustrations and petty aggravations just pile up. We find ourselves saying, "Things just aren't going my way today" or "Just having one of those days." And sometimes THOSE days can be more painful and troublesome than even the big traumas.

Here, David says, "I am afflicted and needy". He calls it "the day of my trouble" (v.7) Later, he'll mention one source as a relational thing: "arrogant and threatening men have risen up against me" (14). It's perhaps what Peter calls, "various trials"... David was a leader with a lot of responsibilities (and trouble comes with the territory) – "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown."

And David prays. He prays to be heard. He prays for relief (vv. 3 & 16 "be gracious to me...save me"). He prays for a kind of emotional turn-around (v. 4 – "make GLAD the soul of Your servant" and v. 16 "grant YOUR strength to Your servant").

And this suffering believer adds reasons to his requests - "I am hurting and weak" (v.1 -"afflicted and needy" i.e. I don't have the strength to go on). Better Pray!

He says (v. 2) , "I'm a godly man..." That's not to say that he's better than other people but that he is related to the God of Grace. The word for "godly" is "Hasid" – like that part of the Jewish people called "Hasid-ic". It comes from our favorite Hebrew word "Hesed" (vv. 5, 13, 15). He's saying, "because You, Lord, keep showing me HESED I am becoming HASID..." i.e. "You show me Your grace and I am becoming gracious. I belong to You. I trust You."

It's like David...who apparently sat down and composed this prayer...and was thoughtful and focused and he is not just blurting out stuff (and there IS a place for impromptu/offhand prayers) but here he offers reasons for his prayers and reasons why he expects to be answered.

He's verbally trusting God and he's preaching to himself. God is good. He is MY God – His grace has claimed me and I belong to Him. God forgives.

He uses both the Name – YHWH (LORD in capitals) but mainly the word "Adonai" (Lord NOT in all capitals which emphasizes God's mastery over all things). He composes his own soul as he thinks of these reasons. He remembers that God has shown HESED (i.e. grace – loyalty to us and to His promises even though WE are not deserving – God's unilateral commitment to His promises and His people).

And THEN right at the MOLTEN core of this prayer – vv. 8-10 – David gets caught up with a kind of vision. His prayer turns to WONDER – and he thinks about how God will one day put an end to all trouble.

It's a very common component of True Spirituality among the writers and characters of the Bible. Jeremiah – "This I call to mind therefore I have hope; that the LORD'S The LORD'S HESED indeed never ceases, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness." (Lam 3.22-23)

It's like in the midst of Jeremiah's pain there's a volcanic eruption (like we've been seeing in Kilauea, Hawaii) – there's an outcropping of light and heat – the Core comes to the surface. It's WORSHIP!

It's like the very end of Habakkuk – “Though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord GOD is my strength, and He has made my feet like the deer's feet and makes me walk on the heights...” (3.17-19). See – it's an explosive realization: Prayer turns to worship .

Think of St Paul's prayers in Ephesians or Philippians where his pen just runs away and he writes these sentences a hundred words long – like he forgets to breathe ... and ends with this red-hot eruption: “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.” (Eph 3.20-21)

And here (9) David prays in the center section...the center verse of this whole composed prayer: “All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, and they shall glorify Your name.”

Praying to God and simultaneously preaching to himself, David's mind and heart erupt into a vision of the end. God will take all of Israel's enemies and God will make them friends...will open their eyes!

All nations who have turned to other gods – idols that are a big, synthetic, cosmic lie and an affront to the only Living and True God (the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) – all these nations will come to see that David's God is worthy... is infinitely admirable...is the only One able to fix all that is broken and save this fallen planet.

This verse is quoted in the Book of Revelation and it will be sung by the ransomed Church made up of Jews and Gentiles, of people from every tribe, nation and tongue....an innumerable multitude gathered at the molten sea singing the Song of Moses and the Lamb (Rev 15.3-4), “Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty; Righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations! "Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; For ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU, FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED.”

David sees the end (all nations worshiping the God of Israel and freed from the tyranny of idols) and Revelation shows us how it will happen. Jesus Christ, the Lion of Judah, the Lamb of God will ransom people from every tribe and tongue with His own blood.

The Lion and the Lamb is not just a Hesed-man...not just Hassidic...not just a godly man but the God-Man The Source of hesed! He comes in the flesh to do God's part of the pact AND to do man's part.

Jesus Christ will fulfill the Law of Moses FOR US. He will satisfy the demands of the Law by doing it all and He will breakdown the dividing wall (Eph 2.14) that separates Jew and Gentile and make ONE NEW HUMANITY of everyone who believes. “All nations will come and worship before You for Your righteous acts have been revealed.”

When David has this explosion – this epiphany of worship at the molten core of his prayer – He prays with a new fervor.

He says, “Lord, unite my heart to fear Your name...” It’s like Francis Schaeffer’s great illustration of idolatry. He said in his book *True Spirituality* that every pursuit: spirituality, hobbies, success, looks, popularity, work, art/music, intellectual pursuits – all of these have their place but none can really integrate us and make us whole people... They’re gods that cannot save us...They’re like big buckets that can’t contain us...what Schaeffer called “false integration points” – But David knew that only God could unite his heart and make him complete.

And see: we need to have this molten core at the center of our prayers if we hope that our suffering will be redemptive – like it was for our Vietnamese friend and for David.

Ask yourself – do you know *The Practice of Transformational Suffering*? The key to this practice is not “follow steps A-B and C”. It’s not something we even really DO... It’s something we receive.

When we are soaked in the Good News of who Jesus Christ IS and what He has done and WILL DO to bring history to its glorious culmination: people from all nations free from these false integration points and all nations worshiping the living God – when we get a sense of that on our hearts... when it ignites...when the molten vision of what lies ahead dawns afresh on us – it changes our prayers.

It unites our hearts and fills us with anticipation and endurance and peace. We may still cry out for relief (it’s ok to do that!) but underneath the suffering are the Everlasting Arms... And when we see it by faith...when we are waiting on God and He makes it erupt and worship occurs – THEN we will find our trials turn to gold...we find a Refuge in the storm...and Joy in the journey.