



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 3rd July 2005
by Mark Ashton

10p

Psalm 142

No one cares for me!

Introduction: Psalms – The Bible’s Spiritual Pressure Valve

We start today a series of sermons in the Book of Psalms—that large section of song lyrics, in the middle of the Bible, many of them ascribed to King David, as this one is. (And incidentally those ascriptions—the words that come between the Psalm number and the first verse—are as original as the text of the psalm itself: no early manuscript of the Psalms exists that does not include them, so they are not like NIV headings which were added in 20th century and are sometimes quite unhelpful).

The psalms are a bit neglected today. In my childhood, one or more psalms would always be included in every church service. But now we read them much less often; which is a pity, because they are the Biblical way for us to express our emotions.

We human beings are emotional creatures. Our feelings rise and fall, ebb and low, quite uncontrollably sometimes—you may remember the man who said, “I always feel bad when I feel good, for fear I’ll feel worse tomorrow!” And sometimes our feelings, our emotions, build up to a desperate pitch of intensity. We can be like a pressure cooker, and, like a pressure cooker, we need a valve to release the pressure before it becomes dangerous. Fiona, my wife, was once stewing some rhubarb in a pressure cooker when the valve stuck closed. At first, of course, we did not know anything was wrong. But then the valve suddenly blew off and a blast of



boiling rhubarb coated the kitchen ceiling, which was not a pretty sight. So, we need a spiritually healthy way to release our emotions—anger, despair, depression,

frustration, grief, sorrow, doubt, longing, expectation, excitement, exultation, joy—and the psalms provide that for us. They reflect our own emotional intensity, and they help us to bring our emotions honestly before God, to let them out... in His presence.

So, let’s start with David’s

1) Honest Complaint to God

vv 1-2

I cry aloud to the LORD; I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy. I pour out my complaint before him; before him I tell my trouble. Faith requires honesty. It is not to do with pretence—pretending there is a God when there isn’t; pretending my life is fine when it isn’t; pretending everything is going to turn out well, when it won’t! Faith demands honesty. And honesty is not easy. Sir Stafford Cripps was possibly the most honest Chancellor of the Exchequer this country has ever had. Asked in 1949 whether he could give an assurance that the pound was not about to be devalued, Cripps replied that he could not. Whereupon the speculative run on the pound, caused by his honesty, forced the country to devalue within days. In international finance, honesty may be very difficult. But David knew that, in relating to God, it was essential. When David wrote these words he was probably in the cave of Adullam (see the ascription), exiled from Israel, pursued by King Saul, in a desperate plight. David did not hide from God how he felt about that. He was entirely honest. And until we are honest about our situation, we cannot exercise saving faith, because we can’t get saved until we accept that we are sinners who need saving. And then again, the way we develop that relationship with God is by being honest with Him, not by pretending. We must be real with God.

I pour out my complaint before him; before him I tell my trouble (v 2). David knew the value of refusing to lapse into silence when his life got

difficult, and his faith came under pressure. At childbirth, the most welcome sound to all concerned is that first scream the baby utters. [except, I suppose, to the baby itself: we all seem to take quite a dim view of entering this world, don't we?] And so the honest cry of His children is a most welcome sound to the ears of God. ***I cry aloud to the LORD; I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy. I pour out my complaint before him; before him I tell my trouble*** (v 1-2). And notice where David took his complaint: the repetition emphasises the point—verse 1 ***to the LORD . . . to the LORD***; verse 2: ***before him; before him***. David did not just whinge. The Australians say that you can tell when a plane full of poms has just arrived in Australia from the UK, because the whining goes on after the engines have been switched off. (And the kiwis will be saying the same, if the British and Irish lions come up with any more excuses.) David did not just moan. He brought his complaints to God. Not in order to bring them to God's attention; we do not tell God our troubles in order to get God to notice them—He already has. We tell God our troubles in order that we may view them against the backdrop of His reality, His power, His love, His grace. It is for our relief and not for His information that we pour out our complaint before Him.

Have we learnt to do that? Are our prayers times a pretence, when we mention the things that seem to us to be appropriate to mention to God, suitably holy to be a topic for prayer, or when we just recite lists of people for whom we want to intercede? Or do we pour out our hearts to God in prayer? Bringing to Him what is troubling us, and laying it before Him? Have we learnt to be honest with God?

It seems that David had learnt that lesson via the painful route of discovering:

2) The limitations of human companionship (vv 3-4)

When my spirit grows faint within me, it is you who know my way (v 3). Like a gleam of sunlight from above, breaking through dark clouds on a stormy day, and lighting up a lonely traveller as he struggles up some weary mountain path, so David found the knowledge that God knew all the circumstances of his life. He might be in darkness, but there was a shaft of light from above.

In the path where I walk men have hidden a snare for me (v 3). The faithful Christian believer will always find that unbelievers around him or her long to see us trip. They want to catch us out. We worry, don't we? about what is said about us behind our backs. We need to remember that nothing is ever said behind God's back. No one ever said a word about you or me that God did not hear. In Christian service we must always remember that we are serving God, first and foremost. What other people think of us must always be a secondary consideration.

Look to my right and see; no one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares for my life (v 4). The desertion of friends can be more painful than the opposition of enemies. But, if it throws the believer back into the arms of God, it serves a good purpose. God alone can meet the needs of our hearts. Woe betide us if we try to get those needs met anywhere else! The person who tries to get all their needs met by another human being is condemned to frustration. Either they have to deny and suppress some of their own deepest needs, or they will go on making demands on the other person which that person can never fully meet. How many marriage relationships founder here! It is said that marriage halves our troubles, doubles our joys . . . and trebles our expenses! But never think that marriage can meet your deepest needs. Too many people do, and much suffering results: That's why they say Marriage is like a besieged city—with one half of the people wanting to get into it, and the other half of the people wanting to get out of it! No—your deepest needs God alone can meet. And can I say to the married: "Are you looking to Him to meet them? Or are you heaping impossible expectations on your spouse/partner"? And can I say to the unmarried: "Do not make the mistake of thinking that anyone else can meet your deepest needs, be he never so handsome and charming and witty and gentle, be she never so graceful and loving and gorgeous and mysterious"!

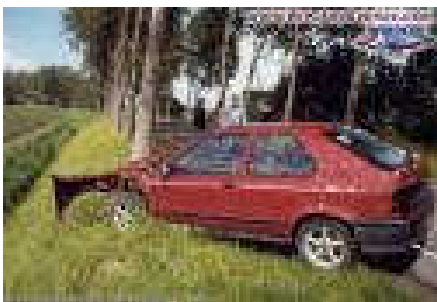
David knew there was only one place to turn: ***I cry to you, O LORD; I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living"*** (v 5). However painfully he had learnt that lesson; it was a lesson worth learning.

3) Exercising Faith in desperate need

(vv 5-7)

I cry to you, O LORD; I say, “You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.” 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 (vv 5-7). Notice how: a) David acknowledged his need of God—it was (v 6) desperate—he had no hope by himself. There were forces ranged against him that were far too strong for him *rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me* (v 6). He was imprisoned *Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name* (v 7). David may have been literally trapped in a cave, but you and I know the dark little dungeon of our own egos. Our selfishness is too strong for us. We cannot break out unaided. But, as well as acknowledging his need: b) David recognised the One who could save him from it. *I cry to you, O LORD; I say, “You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living . . . rescue me from those who pursue me . . . Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name* (vv 5-7). God was his refuge, his rescuer, his liberator. And we know that Jesus is all of that for us. But David did not just acknowledge his need and recognise his rescuer, he articulated it: He cried aloud to the Lord *I cry aloud to the LORD; I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy* (v 1), and he does it again in verse 5: *I cry to you, O LORD; I say, “You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.”*

Imagine you’re driving a car on a journey and for one reason or another it comes to a halt. If you are ever going to reach your destination, you have to do three things. You have to acknowledge you’ve stopped; you have to know where to turn for help; and you have to call out for it. It is no good sitting behind the steering wheel and saying to yourself “Well, we’ll soon be there.” Perhaps you’re out of petrol; perhaps you’ve hit a tree; perhaps there’s been a mechanical breakdown. Maybe you already belong to the AA or the RAC or you got Green Flag cover with your insurance. That’s still not enough. You have to call



them out with the mobile phone to come and put things right.

I wonder if some of us are sitting behind the wheel of our spiritual lives... in the ditch... having hit a tree and we won’t call out honestly to God. Our spiritual lives are actually like this at the moment. Perhaps we’d acknowledge we’re stuck and we know God alone can get us going again: but will we cry out to Him? Or perhaps we have not yet begun the Christian life—we know there is something others have that we do not have, but will we cry out to Jesus for it?

God longs to hear that cry—when we express honestly the deepest desires of our hearts.

But we can’t leave Psalm 142 without noting how it ends.

Glimpsing the rainbow through the rain (v 7)

Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me (v 7). Just as you see that lovely mirage through the raindrops on a stormy day, so David saw through his harsh circumstances and his deep despair to something that was not a mirage at all, a time when he would again know the warmth of Christian fellowship, and the certainty of God’s blessing. For the Christian believer there is brighter sky ahead in this life perhaps, and in the life to come for certain.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)