

Crying Out to God

A Consideration of the Heart's Voice in the Psalms

I Introduction

When Heather and I first moved from the pastorate of Thistleton Baptist Church to work for the Liebenzell Mission of Canada we began searching for a church we could go to on as regular a basis as possible. There is a fairly large reformed church not far from our house and so we decided to go and have a look. It is quite a large church, about 500 people the morning we were there. During the sermon, I whispered – whispered I tell you – the word “Amen” at something said by the elder who was preaching. I did it twice. As we were leaving after the service we were greeted by a man who said “Ah, our exuberant worshipper”. “Exuberant”, I replied, “I pastored a West Indian church for 21 years. You haven’t seen exuberant”. “The man at the end of your pew was glaring at you”, he replied. That was just about the whole conversation. But what I think was meant, even if it wasn’t said was, “You must not express any emotion. You must not be exuberant. You must never upset the man at the end of your pew. And quite frankly, if you insist on being so disruptive, we would prefer that you didn’t come back. We don’t do exuberance here and we have a definition of exuberant that defies explanation”. (I also once gave a tour of this building to a fellow sovereign grace Baptist pastor, who, upon seeing the drums in the sanctuary made a joke about the abomination that causes desolation.)

People can assume that worship that is marked by shouts of “amen”, “praise the Lord”, “preach it” etc. and various other kinds of verbal and physical demonstrations of praise is violating the principle of everything being done decently and in order and perhaps a violation of the regulative principle and therefore to be discouraged and even forbidden since it is flagrant disobedience. And on the other side of the spectrum, there will be those who conclude that if you do not utilize some shouting, hand waving, dancing etc. you are a bunch of old stuffed shirts who don’t have the Spirit and are not truly embracing Christ from your hearts. Those who want to land in the happy middle between these two evangelical points find that it really isn’t that happy and are on a battle field whose terrain is to the opponents’ advantage and they are having to cover both flanks at the same time.

I am not an expressive person emotionally (the sinful ones excepted), and I suspect that in this gathering, I am not the only one. Twenty-one years at this church helped me a great deal in my understanding of expressions of emotion, for which I am very grateful. I can, at least now, shout or whisper amen during a sermon and after a song. I have even been known to clap, fist pump, and raise my body up by standing on my toes, heels off the floor (!!), because God in His mercy, let me pastor here. Most, if not all of us of us here, are Calvinists, soteriologically. And it just may be that we have earned the title that is so often put upon us as the “frozen chosen”. I know I did. In recent years we have had the heretofore unknown creature known as Charismatic Calvinist show up on the scene and it has put our heads into a bit of a spin. Categorizing believers used to be so easy. But my point with this is that the very emotional act of crying out to God is not restricted to a particular brand of the faith. It is not something that we can say is for them, whoever “them” is, and not for us. It is not something that we can wean people away from, if they would only open themselves up to being taught. The Psalmists cried out to God. That is a very emotional action. Emotions are meant to be expressed. There are right and wrong ways to do that. There are right and wrong places, times, and conditions. But we dare not add the word “never” when we are enumerating the ways in which we cry out. It is for the faithful. It is healthy, and it is something about which the Scriptures, especially the Psalms, have a great deal to say.

We are considering crying out to God as we find it in the Psalms. Not only about corporate worship, despite the opening illustration, but crying out to God, from our hearts because God wants us to. Because we can.

“Crying out”

“Crying out to God” is an emotional experience. We are emotional beings and emotions sometimes demand that they come to the surface. We want to avoid both extremes of, on the one hand, concluding that all forms of physical expression are over the top frivolous nonsense and that, on the other hand, concluding that people who do not express themselves demonstrably have no heart for God. We may cry out to God with a scream that no one but God hears and we may cry out to God in such a way that we give the impression that we think God is deaf. What we must not do, is conclude that the way I cry out to God is the only way that it can be done. We should be crying out to God, if the Psalms teach us anything. And it is not merely formal worship that we are talking about when we speak of crying out to God, although all forms of crying to God may qualify as an act of worship. The Psalms close with this call to us to praise God with the whole orchestra. All instruments, loud and soft, are to be employed. Dancing is to be offered in praise to our great God.

*Psalm 150:3 Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!*
4 *Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!*
5 *Praise him with sounding cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!*
6 *Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD!*

Spurgeon, in the Treasury, quotes Bonar as saying this about these verses:

May we not say that in this Psalm’s enumeration of musical instruments, there is a reference to the variety which exists among men in the mode of expressing joy, and exciting to feeling? (Treasury of David, Volume III p. 468)

Well, yes, we may say that, and it is quite a liberating thought to know that there is no one prescribed way in which we must cry out to God. The trumpet is loud, and the harp is quiet. Both are legitimate ways in which to cry out to God in worship. There is no volume commanded or condemned. There is no prohibition against calling out to God while remaining still as a stone nor is there one condemning physical demonstrations. There is much said about the condition of the heart in our worship and in our crying.

To cry out does not necessarily mean to call out in distress, or with tears of sorrow. It may simply mean to call out to God. It may mean to cry out in joy. And one of the challenges when encountering such phraseology in the Scriptures is determining what kind of crying out we are dealing with. But the majority of cries to God in the Psalms are cries that come out of distress for various things going on in the psalmists’ lives and in the nation in which they live. Cries out to God in the Psalms are mostly cries of pain and suffering. We can speak truthfully about crying out in joy and excitement. We encounter the psalmists crying out in praise, in thanks, with joy. We should be thankful that such is the case. But most of our crying is not those things. Most of our crying is because we live on a planet under curse. The Psalms reflect this. Most of the “crying out” in the Psalms are of the pain filled variety. Most of the time, “cry” does not simply mean “call”; it means call out, from the heart, out of pain.

Is crying out to God to be taken literally? When Psalm 47, 66, 81, tell us to “shout for joy” are we disobeying it if we do not give a verbal shout for joy? Well, I would be quick to say “no” to such a question. I believe we can obey this command without necessarily making our worship services a shouting match. But it is a command of Scripture and at the very least we should be very careful about telling others that they must NOT shout for joy, when they can point to texts that tell them to do that very thing. This is difficult for me. I am uncomfortable in

the presence of what seems to me to be unrestrained expression. I don't want people to shout out. I don't want people to be exuberant in their worship. I want them to feel it without expressing it in a manner that gives me a little discomfort. I want people to be like me. But, thanks be to God, everyone is not like me and unless we are going to petition for the homogenous unit principle, we should not want all churches to be of one personality trait either. This means that there might be some who will literally cry out to God in a service of worship. We can attribute it to culture, personality type, Church background, and various other factors. But can we say it should not be done? Will we tell those who may actually give a shout that they might feel more comfortable elsewhere? I cannot fathom sending people away to churches that have joined their enthusiasm with theologies that are heretical at worst and flaky at best simply because I am uncomfortable with their vocalizations in worship.

The God Who Hears

Crying out to God is pretty much a useless endeavour if God does not hear us. But we know that He hears us because it is His idea. He commands us to cry out to Him. He promises to hear us and answer us. Crying out to God could be reduced in definition to one word if we were asked to do so – prayer. Crying out to God is simply a manner of prayer. Prayer can be shouted, whispered, sung, cried, thought, written, rhymed into poetry, as in the Psalms.

Psalm 142:1 - *With my voice I cry out to the LORD; with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD.* Does David need to beg? Does he not know that God is sovereign and does whatsoever He pleases? Is this really necessary? Can I not simply go to God and ask, in a calm, controlled manner and not get carried away with the situation? Does the principle Jesus set down in the Lord Prayer of not heaping up empty words since God knows what we need before we ask, apply here? Will we just give David a Mulligan because he predates Jesus' teaching on the Lord's Prayer by a substantial number of years? Or is this, as I believe it to be, a matter, not of "vain repetitions" such as the Pharisees offered to make a show of themselves, but rather desperation, urgency, at-the-end-of-the-rope-ness. And we should not deny ourselves this privilege because we confuse such emotional outbursts with lack of faith or sinful despair. We need to come to the cries of David and the other Psalmists and be greatly encouraged that we may approach our God in such a manner. It should not make us flippant and it should not make us frivolous in our approach to God. But this should cause us to rejoice very greatly that we can come and talk like this to our God.

But what if it *is* sinful despair? What if such feelings really are a sinful lack of faith, or an inability to maintain hope in the face of the crisis? What if such cries really are something for which we must eventually come to God in repentance? Is it not still true that we can come to God and tell Him how we feel? This is what I find so immensely encouraging about the cries to God in the Scriptures particularly, in the Psalms. This is what I think God was up to when He inspired so many of the cries of despair and hopelessness and anxiety that we find there. He is telling us that we do not need to have our act together to come to Him. It means that we do not need to pretend to be in control if we are not. We do not make despair and doubt and fear virtues. I don't want to doubt. I do not want to be afraid. I do not want to feel like everything is out of control. But sometimes I do. Sometimes the psalmists did. And they went to God anyway and they did not go with high sounding words that defied the way they were feeling. They went with their feelings and put them into words. And God heard them. And God received them. And God acted for them.

Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, love and power.

I will arise and go to Jesus,
 He will embrace me in His arms;
 In the arms of my dear Savior,
 O there are ten thousand charms.

Come, ye thirsty, come, and welcome,
 God's free bounty glorify;
 True belief and true repentance,
 Every grace that brings you nigh.

Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
 Lost and ruined by the fall;
 If you tarry till you're better,
 You will never come at all.

Is this not the message of free grace? Is this not what we preach to lost sinners? "Do not try to prepare yourself before you come to Christ. Jesus is not waiting for you to get your act together in order for you to come to Him. You do not have your act together and you are unable to get your act together. Come, just as you are, in repentant faith, and He will receive you."

Does this principle end when we repent and are saved? Does God say to lost sinners that they can come empty and desperate and sinful and then to us that we can only come once we have all our ducks in a row? It would be to live in opposition to the Gospel. This will not lead us to licentious living. But it will enable us to call out to God with honesty and freedom and find help from Him who says, not only to lost sinners, but to His children as well, "Come as you are". Unlike people who ask "how are you", in the hope that we will merely say "fine thanks" and not more, God means it. He wants to hear our complaints, our sorrows expressed. Is this not at least part of the point of the incredible soul revealing writing that we find in the Psalms? We find it elsewhere as well, which adds to the encouragement, but the Psalms are permeated with these things. The Psalms are poetry and music. And poetry and music, be it said, are the language of the soul and what we find in the Psalms is real soulspeak. These poems are not written from a distance. Real poetry defies writing with unconcerned detachment. Cold, unfeeling poetry is an oxymoron. Real poetry, which the Psalms are, is written from the heart, from experience, from empathy and pain and joy and anger and a desire for things to be right that are wrong; for things that are twisted to be made straight; for things which are wrong to be made right. That kind of poetry is created in the soul and will not be satisfied until it is released from there to the page or vocal chords. And while we are not all poets and none of us will have our poetry divinely inspired, we can benefit greatly from the inspired poets that God has put in the Psalter. And so, God turns the questions and pain of the Psalmist into a song that cannot be destroyed and preserves it three thousand years after it is written so that we, wrestling with whatever it is that we are wrestling with, will have some comfort and learn also that we, like the Psalmist, can cry out to God too. It truly is a grand and glorious thing.

Psalm 77:

- ⁷ *"Will the Lord spurn forever,
 and never again be favorable?
⁸ Has his steadfast love forever ceased?
 Are his promises at an end for all time?
⁹ Has God forgotten to be gracious?
 Has he in anger shut up his compassion?"*

We do not know the circumstances that led Asaph to write such things and it is good and right that we do not. If we knew we might be tempted to restrict such responses to those circumstances. But God keeps us in the shadows regarding what Asaph was talking about. And when the day comes that we can identify with

what he says, and recite it as our own, we will not be able to say, “My case is different”. We don’t know that it is. We will not be tempted to puff ourselves up with pride and say “I have a right to my misery. My situation is so much worse than Asaph’s”. Nor can we say that Asaph had every right to his grief because of the great severity of his troubles and therefore punish ourselves for feeling similar over our comparatively trivial problem.

What we can do is take great encouragement from the fact that Asaph is not condemned for coming to God in this state and that God does something between verses 9 and 10 that leads him to say:

¹⁰ *Then I said, “I will appeal to this,
to the years of the right hand of the Most High.”*

¹¹ *I will remember the deeds of the LORD;
yes, I will remember your wonders of old.*

¹² *I will ponder all your work,
and meditate on your mighty deeds.*

¹³ *Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is great like our God?*

¹⁴ *You are the God who works wonders;
you have made known your might among the peoples.*

¹⁵ *You with your arm redeemed your people,
the children of Jacob and Joseph. Selah*

¹⁶ *When the waters saw you, O God,
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
indeed, the deep trembled.*

¹⁷ *The clouds poured out water;
the skies gave forth thunder;
your arrows flashed on every side.*

¹⁸ *The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;
your lightnings lighted up the world;
the earth trembled and shook.*

¹⁹ *Your way was through the sea,
your path through the great waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.*

²⁰ *You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*

Would the glories that Asaph experienced in verses 10-20 have come if He had not cried out to God the way he did in the earlier verses? Asaph cried out to God and the Lord heard him. He brought Asaph out of the despair of verses 1-9 and into the glory of verses 10-20. We do not know how long it took Asaph to write Psalm 77. We do not know if he put his pen down at the end of verse 9 and had a good cry. I’d like to think he did but God hasn’t said so it’s better not to speculate. But it sure seems that something happened between verses 9 and 10. And again between verses 12 and 13. He went from crying out to God in utter hopelessness to singing songs of praise because of the past works of God. And it also seems that the Scriptures were a large part of the interlude. And so, in these few verses we have the crying out, and the indication of God having heard and a hint at what the Lord used to bring Asaph back to himself again. And it is so ordinary and so real and so usable. If we will admit to the feelings of verses 7-9, coming to God with them in the bold honesty of these verses, perhaps we will hear an answer from God written in Holy Scripture that will lead us to finish our poem with much greater exultation than when we began. Our great God hears. (See this pattern in Psalm 6, 42 and 43 – repeatedly, 55, 61, 69, 71, 130, and others). The only question remaining is “Do we cry out?” Do we cry out like this? Do we lay ourselves bare before Him with whom we have to do and refuse to leave? Do we allow this type of crying in our prayer meetings, Bible studies? Do we express ourselves like this when we chat with other believers?

But not all the crying out Psalms have a happy ending. Some end with the same despair with which they started, there being no indication that God showed up at all.

Psalm 44

²³ *Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever!*
²⁴ *Why do you hide your face?
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?*
²⁵ *For our soul is bowed down to the dust;
our belly clings to the ground.*
²⁶ *Rise up; come to our help!
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!*

Psalm 70 ends with:

⁵ *But I am poor and needy;
hasten to me, O God!
You are my help and my deliverer;
O LORD, do not delay!*

Psalm 74:

²² *Arise, O God, defend your cause;
remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day!*
²³ *Do not forget the clamor of your foes,
the uproar of those who rise against you, which goes up continually!*

Psalm 88

¹⁸ *You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;
my companions have become darkness.*

No happy, faith filled, God showed up between the verses stuff here. We leave Psalm 44 wondering if God heard the author's pleas at all. Psalm 88 is the same. "You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness." End of Psalm 88. We can be grateful that Psalm 89 is written by the same man and perhaps is the follow up to the tragedy that Psalm 88 is. But Psalm 88 is not a fairy tale that ends with "happily ever after". It just ends.

A friend and I went to see the movie "No Country for Old Men". The closing scene in the movie is a conversation between Sherriff Ed Tom Bell and his wife at the breakfast table. Ed Tom is telling his wife, at her insistence, about one of the dreams he had the night before:

I was on horseback goin' through the mountains of a night. Goin' through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and [my father] rode past me and kept on goin'. Never said nothin' goin' by - just rode on past. And he had his blanket wrapped around him and his head down. When he rode past, I seen he was carryin' fire in a horn the way people used to do, and I-I could see the horn from the light inside of it - about the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin' on ahead and he was fixin' to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold. And I knew that whenever I got there, he'd be there. And then I woke up.

And the movie ends. I almost jumped out of my seat when the credits started rolling. "What a great ending!" I thought. The movie ends like this and the bad guys have not been caught. The sheriff has retired without ever getting him. My friend did not think it was a great ending. He wanted closure. He wanted the bad guy caught, the good guys vindicated. I liked the fact that life was represented as uncertain. I liked that the good guy was

left wondering if it all was a waste of time. The only thing missing in the ending was hope. It is the perfect picture of life without God. It really is meaningless. Movies should end with despair and sadness and fear – if they cannot look higher than the breakfast table. Psalm 88 ends with the tragedy of a man mourning the betrayal of his friend. The one who should provide him with some light in his darkness is just more darkness. And then it ends. This is how we feel at times. Our life psalms don't always end well. It is an encouragement that is off the scale. Life is not a Psalm of 19 verses that ends well. It ends after 18 verses with the word “darkness”. This is how we feel at times.

But the Bible consists of more than just Psalm 88. We have Psalm 88 in our canon of life. But God wrote Psalm 89, and a few other things as well. And though there be “my companions have become darkness” episodes of life that seem to end our psalms, there is always, always the beginning of Psalm 89 telling us that we can “*sing of the steadfast love of the Lord forever: with [our] mouth[s we] will make known your faithfulness to all generations*”. But the point here is this. Psalm 88 ends with prayer. It is God who the psalmist is telling about his betrayer friend. He is not praying because all the issues have been resolved. He is not praying because God has come and made everything right. He did not write this Psalm after everything got resolved. But he is praying anyway. He is pouring his heart out to God. He is going to the only place he can go when life seems to make no sense – the Author of life. This is real crying out to God. We will not allow the seeming deafness of God make us conclude that the Scriptures are lying to us. The Scriptures tell us, here and elsewhere that sometimes it is a long time. Sometimes we will think that God has gone away, plugged his ears, refused to answer. And it is because the Scriptures tell us this that we will not give up. We are told to keep on knocking, keep on asking, keep on seeking – because the answer will not always come when we want it to. We are told to persevere because the God who loves us has designed that everything worth having is going to come with difficulty. And the longer we wait, the more crying out we will do. It is at times like this, when the door of heaven seems locked, that we must forsake the façade of having it all together. It is when it is dark that we need to cry out the loudest. It is then that we must seek the help of God and of others.

Honesty

What we encounter in Psalm 77 and many others is people at the end of themselves who, if they ever played games with God before, are not doing so now. They are brutal in their honesty about themselves before God and most of the time we see that God hears and restores. Is it possible to bear false witness against ourselves? Is it possible to do so with the Almighty? Do we ever come to God in prayer pretending to have our act together when both God and we know it is not the case? Is that not a worse sin to commit than crying out to God in the abject poverty of our emotions and then finding that He responds to such heart self-exposure just as He responded to us in the past when we came to Him seeking the forgiveness of our sins?

There are times when I do not feel like God is very close. And while the old adage “If God feels distant, guess who moved?” may occur to me and I know that it just may be true, I still feel the distance, and while I would never pray Psalm 22, since I know that God has not forsaken me, I can pray, and should pray “Lord, it feels like you have forsaken me.”

My closest and dearest friend, Stuart, took his own life on September 17, 2003. His wife called to tell me and asked if I would drive to Hamilton to tell his father. After letting his dad and step-mom know, we drove to Burlington to tell his sister. As we stood in a small circle to pray before we separated for the night I said something along the lines of “Lord, we do not like this and we wish this had not happened. We do not know why you did not stop it. You could have broken Stu's leg as he made his way to the barn, and we wish you had, but you did not, and we just ask that you get us through this. Help us to know that we are not abandoned and alone, for that is how we feel.” There are those times when the circumstances obliterate our ability to be

eloquent and flowery when we pray, and our prayers just turn into pleas; unadorned, ugly, messy calls for help that come straight from the heart in faith and hope that God will hear and answer and help us.

I believe that after a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, the most important quality in our praying is honesty. There is far too much stained-glassness in our public praying, and perhaps in our private praying as well. In my opinion there is not nearly enough desperate crying out to God, if desperate crying is what we feel like doing. And if we don't feel desperate we need a good education in our own helplessness. (There was a man at Thistleton who used to pray "Lord, we know how much you love us" and I could never give it an amen. We have no idea how much God loves us.) Honesty in all things is near the top of the traits of a follower of Jesus Christ and since crying out to God is crying out to *God* we would be very wise not to approach Him in our cries with anything less than utterly naked honesty. All liars have their place in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur (Revelation 21:8). Lying to God would surely have a special spot on that lake and a quicker road to it if everyone who practised it were treated the same way that Annanias and Sapphira were.

I do not think that the psalmists were exaggerating when they spoke of the condition of their inner being in the crises they wrote about.

*Psalm 6:⁶ I am weary with my moaning;
every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping.
⁷ My eye wastes away because of grief;
it grows weak because of all my foes.*

These Psalms are such a great encouragement to us because they reflect how we truly feel. Elijah was not the only one with a nature just like ours. These men, inspired by God to write from their souls' horrors are feeding us three thousand years after their crises because we suffer in the same ways and find encouragement from the same God.

That the Psalms are the genuine feelings and thoughts of the writers in the varied conditions of life on this planet is a great encouragement to us to call out to God with the particular Psalm that reflects what we are going through. This is the beauty of the Psalms in general. We find in them the response of the heart of the author to the same conditions and vicissitudes that we face as well. Are you being persecuted, challenged in your faith, encouraged by the fellowship of the saints, bewildered at the sins of God's people, perplexed at the silence of God ...? There is an inspired text in the Psalter that you can recite/sing from your heart as well.

This leads us to the conclusion that the various emotions reflected in the Psalms are legitimate to express. They may not all be legitimate to hold, but we should not add the sin of hypocrisy to the sin of despair or lack of faith. This distinction between what is legitimate to hold to and what is legitimate to express is crucially important. The Psalms teach us that at the very least we should be honest before God with our feelings. The lady sat across from me in my office and went on at length about the way she was feeling about things in the church. "Have you told God about the way you are feeling?" I asked. She looked at me with shock in her eyes. "No.". But what she really meant was, "I would never tell God these things." "Does He know you feel this way?", I asked. "And when you pray, are you pretending that such feelings are not yours? Will you go to God with pious language and acceptable requests while seeking to hide from Him who knows all things, that this is how you really feel?" We can look at some of the cries of the Psalms (and in other texts as well) and be shocked at what we find there and never consider saying similar things to Him. But we should at least remember that these words of joy and pain and doubt and fear and anger ... were put into the eternal Word of God by God Himself. He is the One who saw to it that they get written down. He is the One who saw to it that the got

expressed. And He is the One who tells us to read them now and be benefitted by them. And one of the lessons for us in reading them is to learn to pray and cry out to God in similar fashion.

I need the Psalter. I need it because I experience the same range of emotions that are stated in them. You simply cannot be stoic and hold that the Psalms are leading you to approach God in the way that they do. We need to read the Psalms with the attitude that maintains “I can approach God, worship God, express myself to God – like this as well, if this is how I feel”.

We need to read the Psalms with empathy. It is impossible to know with certainty the particular event that precipitated a particular Psalm. And I believe this is intentional. The not knowing tells us that we can approach God with the very same words in our situation that the Psalmist does because we feel the same way he did, even though our circumstances may not be precisely alike. God does not tell us what the circumstances were and for that I am glad.

If the superscription to Psalm 51 is correct, we do not need to conclude that we have to commit adultery, murder and heartless worship in order to find help from it. And since we cannot say with 100% accuracy that Psalm 51 was definitely written by David after his adultery and committing murder then we too can say, this is true of me. “The generality [of Psalm 100] is intentional and allows the psalm to speak to later generations and in new situations”

Faith

The crying out to God we find in the Scriptures are acts of faith. Maybe there are those who believe that the calm, controlled response while enduring some horror of life is the demonstration of faith in the God who brings us low. The person who does not get worked up but methodically, without losing his cool, or giving way to panic, simply commits his way to God in the midst of the crisis. Similarly, when great joy producing things happen, the conversion of a much prayed for friend, the news of the release of a Christian prisoner of conscience, the marriage of a child to a sound believer, do not produce those physical manifestations of fist pumping, shouting and jumping up and down. And these people are seen to be great people of faith. But it is no less an act of faith to cry out to God when things are falling apart. Crying out is what happens when we have just about had enough and we think we cannot take anymore. Crying is what happens when we hear another report of a scandal in the Roman Catholic Church that uses the word “thousands”, when referring to the number of victims. Crying is what happens when another mega church pastor is exposed as an abuser. Crying happens when the person we worked with, played with, sat with for countless hours answering questions – dies without a hint that he was ever repentant. The list is very long regarding what makes us cry and then in our despair, cry out to God. This life is hard. It is cruel and unjust. The god of this world has blinded it. How can we not cry out to God? To not do so is to abandon the faith altogether.

The Psalms of lament take us away from our romantic pictures of the age in which they were written. They encourage us because they tell us that life is not different today. They did not live in a time when God was constantly appearing and giving revelations of Himself. Life was hard and cruel and uncertain, and people hung on to God in fear and doubt and desperation and longing for something better, something more, and they did so with a lot less Scripture than we have and unfulfilled promises of a saving Messiah. Are we afraid to make such conclusions? Do we think that if we let our thinking go there that we are somehow betraying the faith? “If I conclude that these people were hungry for the fulfilment of God’s promises to them and guilty of thinking that maybe he wasn’t coming at all, and that life was just not as rosy as they had hoped it would be once they got their spiritual act together, then what does that say about me?” The Psalm writers maintained their faith in the face of obstacles far beyond our ability to even imagine. What kind of Psalm would you write in the absence of a completed canon, no indwelling Holy Spirit, no one of whom you could say “he was tempted in every way

like us, yet without sin”? What Psalm would I write in the absence of antibiotics, child tax credits, dental plans and social media? And it is in the face of thinking such things that I come away amazed at what the Psalmists were able to write, even in their sorrow and anguish.

A cry out to God is a cry OUT TO GOD, meaning that it is not running away from God. It is not the shaking of the fist at God. It is, in the midst of great joy or trial, running to God to praise, to complain, to ask for help. They are all cries of faith. Here we are feeling forsaken, abandoned, alone – and what do we do. We run toward – tooo-ward the very One who could have prevented it all from happening. Yea, verily the very one who allowed it to happen. Yea, verily, verily, the very one who did it to us. This is what we need to see in such texts as Psalm 22:1 as we remember that before Psalm 22 is a prophecy, it is something real happening in the life of David that causes him to cry out. And the cry is made to the One he believes has forsaken him. That, dear people, is faith at work. Who of us who have pastored for at least twenty minutes have not seen this kind of faith at work? Who of us has not received that phone call from a distraught believer in our church who has been taken into the slough of despond by some calamity and they cannot pray. They can barely speak – but they believe. They believe God will hear even if they cannot be the one to offer it. And you are given the inestimable privilege of being the voice of a crushed saint before our sovereign loving God. Why? Because this crushed saint called the man of God to petition God on his/her behalf, because she believes that He is there, and He is faithful, and He will do for us what needs to be done. And what shall we pray? Well, we can rejoice that the words to the disciples about not worrying what to say when persecuted can also sometimes be applied to not knowing what to pray in other situations as well and we will testify later that God gave us words beyond our ability to speak. But what we will do in most of these situations is cry out to God with inspired words of others that God gave them when they were in despair. We will pray, for our suffering people:

(I put how we pray this, in brackets)

Psalm 86

*Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me,
for I am (we are) poor and needy.*

² *Preserve my (your servant's life) life, for I am (he is, in Christ) godly;
save your servant, who trusts in you—you are my (his) God.*

³ *Be gracious to me, (him) O Lord,
for to you do I (we) cry all the day.*

⁴ *Gladden the soul of your servant,
for to you, O Lord, do I (we) lift up my soul.*

⁵ *For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving,
abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.*

⁶ *Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer;
listen to my (his) plea for grace.*

⁷ *In the day of my trouble I (we) call upon you,
for you answer me.(him)*

And we can do this with other of the Psalms that God has preserved for such a time as this and pray them with our people and after the amen, they will say “What a lovely prayer” and we will respond, “Yes, God wrote it”. And then, not only have we comforted a weary soul, but we have taught them how to pray the Psalms, to their own growth and betterment.

Lamenting Evil

Not all the cries to God are because of hardship in the psalmists' lives. They also cry out to God because of evil in the world that has gripped their minds and broken their hearts.

I have always been taken by the account of who gets spared death by God in Ezekiel 9

3 Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house. And he called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his waist. 4 And the LORD said to him, "Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it." 5 And to the others he said in my hearing, "Pass through the city after him, and strike. Your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. 6 Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one on whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were before the house.

We are not told that these people cried out to God in their grief, but we are told that their grief is a good thing. Their grief is over the sins of the city of Jerusalem. It is their grief that God sees and therefore spares them punishment. To not grieve over sin is to be complicit in it. The wickedness of the age and the church should greatly concern us. Crying out to God should be our first response to the wickedness that envelopes us and in which we live. And what shall we call?

*Psalm 7:9 Oh, let the evil of the wicked come to an end,
and may you establish the righteous—
you who test the minds and hearts,
O righteous God!*

And we do not call this as men who have no hope. We call this as men who know that the best and first place to go is to a sovereign God who can make it stop. But we will also call as men who are tired of the pain and abuse and hurt that is in the world. We want the wickedness to stop. And if we have no feelings for the suffering and oppressed of the world then let us call upon God to get some. Because to travel through this world and not be moved by the off the scale horrors that go on in it is to be deadened too much by it. To cry out to God on behalf of the suffering, abused, oppressed of the world is set before us in the Psalms as a mark of the righteous.

It is a striking thing that the cries to God because of wickedness committed against others is just as passionate and just as angst ridden as the cries for themselves when the troubles are theirs. It is sin that should rip at the heart of the righteous, not just our sin. All sin offends a holy God and the righteous are greatly affected when the innocent are victims of others.

Psalm 10

Why, O LORD, do you stand far away?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

² *In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor;
let them be caught in the schemes that they have devised.*

³ *For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul,
and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the LORD.*

⁴ *In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him;
all his thoughts are, "There is no God."*

⁵ *His ways prosper at all times;
your judgments are on high, out of his sight;
as for all his foes, he puffs at them.*

⁶ *He says in his heart, "I shall not be moved;
throughout all generations I shall not meet adversity."*

⁷ *His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression;
under his tongue are mischief and iniquity.*

⁸ *He sits in ambush in the villages;
in hiding places he murders the innocent.*

*His eyes stealthily watch for the helpless;
⁹ he lurks in ambush like a lion in his thicket;
 he lurks that he may seize the poor;
 he seizes the poor when he draws him into his net.
¹⁰ The helpless are crushed, sink down,
 and fall by his might.
¹¹ He says in his heart, "God has forgotten,
 he has hidden his face, he will never see it."
¹² Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand;
 forget not the afflicted.
¹³ Why does the wicked renounce God
 and say in his heart, "You will not call to account"?
¹⁴ But you do see, for you note mischief and vexation,
 that you may take it into your hands;
 to you the helpless commits himself;
 you have been the helper of the fatherless.
¹⁵ Break the arm of the wicked and evildoer;
 call his wickedness to account till you find none.
¹⁶ The LORD is king forever and ever;
 the nations perish from his land.
¹⁷ O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted;
 you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear
¹⁸ to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed,
 so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more.*

The Psalm opens with a call out to God asking why He hides Himself when trouble comes. The troubles that causes the Psalmist to call out are the wicked pursuit of the poor (verse 2), cursing, deceit, oppression, mischief and iniquity (verse 7), murdering the innocent (verse 8), seizing the poor (verse 9), crushing the helpless (verse 10), the wicked living in their belief that God does not know what they are doing (11) and the Psalm ends as it begins with the Psalmist calling for God to stop the wickedness (verse 15) and judge the wicked (verse 15). And He calls out, may we surmise, in joy, affirming that God does hear the desire of the afflicted and that He will strengthen their heart, incline His ear and bring justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that wickedness will no longer reign on the earth (verses 15-18).

In 1980 an official of the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada spoke at our chapel service at Central Baptist Seminary. During his talk, he mentioned that while they had hoped that a certain young man would go to Newfoundland to plant a church there, he was no longer able to go. In the cafeteria after chapel I spoke to the man and said that they should not forsake the plan to plant a church in St. John's. St. John's was my home town and I cared deeply about people there getting the Gospel. Without batting an eye, the man said to me – "Why don't you go?"

The cries in the Psalms are often cries for God to act. We would be among the first to conclude that when we pray for God to do something, we should not understand that to mean that we should just wait for God to act while we do nothing. There are those things about which we can do nothing. But we do not see our cries to God as meaning that we simply do nothing. We pray to be healed and go to the doctor. We pray for safe travel and buckle up. We call out to God to save sinners with the commitment and belief that we may just be what God uses for that prayer to be answered. It is hypocritical for us to pray for God to save people and not use the means that God has determined must be used if the elect are going to be saved. God saves people through the preaching of the Gospel and the prayer for God to save is also an acknowledgement that we must do what God commands us to do in order for that prayer to be answered. The answer to the question that God put to Ezekiel in Ezekiel 37 is "yes, these bones can live". God can make them live. Then why preach to them? Preaching will

not resurrect them. But preaching is the tool God uses to do that very thing. “preach to the bones, Ezekiel – and preach to the wind to enter them so that they will live”. Preach and pray. So, we call out to God for various things and we live in obedience to the commands of God upon us and watch as He accomplishes great things through our simple acts of obedience. It seems that Asaph read the Scriptures in Psalm 77 as part of his recovery from his despair. To cry out to God on behalf of the suffering of the world and do nothing that God has given us the ability to do to help alleviate the suffering is to not truly cry out to God from our hearts. The pain that I am in right now is of course the most serious thing that has happened since Noah left the ark and I will cry out to God about it and astonishingly God will hear and respond and help me. But if I never get beyond my own life as the cause of my cries to God then I have not read these cries with my eyes open at all. And I am self-absorbed and need to be rescued from that.

It is without doubt that all sin, as David reminds us in Psalm 51, is against Him and against Him only. But this is not meant to draw us to the conclusion that others are not affected by the sins that are committed. I tend to think that Uriah was pretty deeply affected by David’s murder of him. The man who abuses his children sins against God first and foremost. But he most certainly sins against the children as well. They get hurt. They suffer. They die. And they have an obstacle in front of them that while not insurmountable, more severely blocks them from seeing a loving Father who sent Jesus to rescue him. Salvation from sin is ultimately for God’s glory, even before it is for our benefit. The angels shouted first and foremost to the shepherds that Jesus birth meant “glory to God in the highest”. But that is not where their shouting ended. There will also be peace for those with whom He is pleased. All this to say that while we mourn for what sins in the world do for the glory of God, we should also mourn for what it does to people. A man may be poor because he is lazy. He may be poor because he is stupid. He may be poor because he has no skills that get the big bucks. And he may be poor because he is the victim of oppression. The world will most often not recognize laziness and stupidity. But that does not mean that oppression should never break our hearts. It should. It made the Psalmists cry out to God. We should do no less.

Conclusions

Romans 15:1-7 - We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ² Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³ For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

The Old Testament was written, in part, to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. I suppose there is an endless number of ways in which we can see that to be true. But for our purposes here we affirm that the cries to God that we find in the Psalms certainly fulfil their God given purpose for us.

We can cry out to God. Crying out to God is not something we might have to do if things get bad enough. It is something we are permitted to do. Crying out to God is a grace that beggars description. This should make us shout. We believe that God is not required to save anyone. We believe that God set His love upon a chosen multitude and did for them what they would never be able to do for themselves nor even ask it to be done. We cry out to God because we can. All manner of people call out to all manner of gods in the world. One need not be a Christian believer to call out to gods or God. People cry out to God when tragedy strikes (or curse Him, as the case may be). They cry out to God when they feel hard done by. They call out to God when they are at the end of their rope. It takes no special grace to call out to God. But it takes a miracle of the triune God through the Gospel of Jesus Christ at work in the soul of the repentant to enable real communion with this God to truly take

place. And that is what we have. The God who chose us, orchestrated our redemption, came for us, accomplished our salvation and is returning to retrieve us someday is the God who now says, “Come, and speak. I will hear. I will answer. I will welcome you as my true son or daughter. I will receive you as I receive my own Son.” The privilege should stun us.

We need to make the cries of the Psalms our cries. This does not mean that we cannot read the Psalms unless we are enduring or enjoying the same things that the Psalmist was. But it does mean that we should not read them with unattached coldness. We should become very familiar with the Psalms so that unlike some aging pastor doing a paper from the Psalms, you will not encounter the “I know it is in there somewhere” problem when trying to find an appropriate text. We need, in the words of C.H. Spurgeon, to bleed biblene, so that when the time of trial or joy comes, we will have as the cry of our heart, the very Word that God inspired to be used for that very purpose.

Recommended Reading

The Cry of the Soul - How our emotions reveal our deepest questions about God
 Dr. Dan B. Allender and Dr. Tremper Longman III
 NavPress, 1994

A Place of Healing – Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering
 Joni Eareckson Tada
 David C Cook, 2010

How Long, O Lord – Reflections on Suffering and Evil
 D.A. Carson
 Baker Academic, 2006

