

Come to the Lord in your despair and turmoil

Thursday was RU OK? day. It's a day specifically set up to allow people to ask their friends, family, work colleagues if they're OK – really OK. To stop and not just ask the standard, 'how ya goin,'" but to seriously ask if they're OK. It's an attempt to open up dialogue in our society on depression and suicide, and to offer help to those who it turns out are struggling.

One of the characteristics of our culture is our stiff upper-lip. When we're feeling down, many in our culture say we should get over it, move on. I think that's changing, there's been plenty of publicity over depression and mental health in the last few years. But some people still feel that they shouldn't bring it up to their friends if they're struggling with depression, even having suicidal thoughts.

That's the broader Aussie context. But there's a similar issue in the Aussie church culture. In some churches, the very idea that you're struggling with anything is anathema. There's this idea that your life should go well if you're a Christian. Some think it's impossible for a real Christian to struggle with depression.

But as soon as you begin to read the Psalms, that view can't hold water. God's people are not promised 'victory' in this life. Christians won't always be the leaders, their businesses won't always succeed, and they won't always be happy and healthy.

God doesn't promise that becoming a Christian will solve all your earthly problems. He doesn't say that it'll be smooth sailing. If you believe God has promised those things for this life, you need to hear Psalm 6. If you're a Christian but you don't believe God promised those things, you still need Psalm 6. It'll prepare you for those moments of hardship, like an inoculation. And if you're not a Christian at all, you need Psalm 6 too. You need to hear of the God who meets his people in the hardships of life, and who promises that one day there will be rescue.

In this Psalm we're invited to come to the Lord in our despair and turmoil. Not to try and sweep our troubles under the rug in embarrassment, but to come, and pour out our heart to him.

Feeling God's displeasure

In verses 1-3 we're invited to come to the Lord in our despair and turmoil when we feel God's displeasure.

Look at David's words. 'O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger, nor chasten me in your hot displeasure.' It's impossible to know what inspired David to write this. Has a prophet told him that God's angry? Is he guilt ridden by sin and certain his circumstances are God's punishment?

We can't know, but whether David was under God's anger or he only felt that way, his response isn't what you'd expect. Instead of running away from God, David runs to him. He doesn't complain it's unfair, he doesn't try to justify himself. He comes to God and begs for his anger to be put aside.

I've seen it time and again, where a young child has been disciplined by their parents, and it results in many tears.

What amazes me is that sometimes those children who've just received discipline from their parents, instead of running away in tears, they go to their parents, eager for their comfort.

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The same parent who disciplined them is the one who comforts, who speaks soft words to them, cuddling them until the child is all cried out.

And that's what David's doing. He comes to the God he thinks is angry with him, like the rebellious nations should in Psalm 2. God is angry with them, but they can find refuge in the Son, the King God appointed.

Verses 2-3: 'Have mercy on me, O LORD, for I am weak; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled; but you, O LORD – how long.'

He's completely swallowed up by weakness. His bones, his soul, two ways of describing the very core of him, are troubled. Actually, 'troubled' is a weak translation – he's 'terrified.' Why? Surely God's anger is his greatest terror! But he comes to God in desperation. God is his only hope, and he cries out 'how long?' 'How long will I be languishing like this? How long until you take this burden from me? How long until your anger is gone, and I'm made well again?'

Can you imagine another King making this cry in your mind's eye? Feeling weak beyond belief, suffering the awful weight of the wrath of God as he hangs there, bound to the cross by the nails in his hands and feet. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

David calls out to the Lord in his despair and turmoil as he feels God's displeasure, foreshadowing the cry his greater son would later make.

Feeling completely spent

And he calls out to the Lord when he feels completely spent, verses 4-7. Look at the emotion as David cries out in these verses! First, he fears that he's close to death in verse 5. He cries out to God to save him, because he's helpless.

Verse 5 raises some interesting questions for us. What is David saying about the afterlife? Doesn't he believe there is one? If he does think there's an afterlife, doesn't he believe that those who are there praise God? Look at what he says: 'For in death there is no remembrance of you; in the grave who will give you thanks?'

What's going on here? Is the Bible divided on the idea of heaven and hell, of existence after death?

David clearly has an understanding of the afterlife. When his child from Bathsheba died shortly after being born, he said, 'I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.' He believes in life after death. So what does he mean that there's no remembrance of God in death, or when he asks who will give thanks in the grave?

He must mean that in death he won't be able to remind people of God's mercies or lead the people in thanks for them. He won't be able to join them in the assembly as the people gather to sacrifice and praise the Lord. And so he cries out in despair. Like no doubt Megan Merkel's father was in despair that his sickness kept him from her wedding to Prince Harry, David was desperate not to be kept from praising God with his people.

That should challenge us. Do we feel this way? Are we this eager to come together with God's people to praise him each week that we cry out in despair when we can't? Or are we happy enough to skip church some weeks because something else is more important?

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He can't keep himself from crying in verses 6-7. Look at his words there:

'I am weary with my groaning; all night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with my tears. My eye wastes away because of my grief; it grows old because of my enemies.'

And once again we look to that other King, who in the garden was distressed, his sweat becoming like great drops of blood, who in Hebrews 5:7 prayed to God with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death – but who didn't, that his wrath would be taken away from us, and we'd know the joys of eternal life in his presence.

Anticipating his salvation

This Psalm invites us to come to the Lord in our despair and turmoil. Just like David, we can come when we feel God's displeasure, and when we feel completely spent. And when we come, we come anticipating his salvation.

It's a sudden shift from verses 6-7 to verse 8. He's been on his bed, crying his eyes out, despairing because of his circumstances. He's pouring out his heart to God. And suddenly, verse 8: 'Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity; for the LORD has heard the voice of my weeping.'

Again, we don't know what brought on this sudden anticipation and confidence in God's salvation. Whatever it was, David revels in the reversal of his circumstances which will come.

Notice from verse 9, it's not as if everything's sorted itself out already. 'The LORD has heard my supplication; the LORD will receive my prayer.' He's confident that God has already heard him, but he's still waiting for God to act on it.

But he can wait with confidence, and anticipate his salvation from his circumstances, because the LORD is faithful. He knows God's character. He's already pointed to his character in verse 4, where he pleads with God to save him for 'your mercies' sake.' That word 'mercies' is the Hebrew 'hesed.'

It's tied to the covenant name of God, where God describes his name in Exodus 34:6, 'the LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in hesed – in goodness – and truth. 'Hesed' is used as a summary of God's character, his mercy, kindness, steadfast love. And it's because of his mercies that David can be assured and anticipate God's salvation. He hasn't done it yet, but it's assured, because that's who God is.

We all know what it's like to anticipate something with eagerness and confidence. In two weeks, my family will be in Baranduda, near Wodonga. There'll be a birthday party there, and we know that we'll have lots of fun. The date is set, the food will be great, the kids will enjoy themselves, the conversation will range from serious to entertaining, we'll play some board games.

Of course, it is possible that something might go wrong. We can't be 100% confident in people here, because we aren't completely in control. But God is in control, and his character is sure. So, David can be certain that God will save him from his current despair and turmoil.

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And he anticipates the same trouble and distress that he's been through, to become the experience of his enemies. Verse 10, 'let all my enemies be ashamed and greatly troubled; let them turn back and be ashamed suddenly.'

Part of his trouble was the plots and desires of his enemies. If God is to be full of mercy and to rescue him from his terror, these enemies have to be removed. And that judgement they face will lead them to experiencing terror, and being ashamed suddenly. Except they won't receive the discipline from God David is experiencing, designed to shape him to be more godly. This will be the terror of God's judgement for his enemies, those who threaten his king, from which there is no escape – except in repentance.

David came to the Lord in his despair and turmoil. He came when he felt God's displeasure, when he was feeling spent. And he could come, anticipating his salvation from the terrible situation he found himself in. God is faithful, and he shows mercy to his children.

And we can come with even greater assurance than David, even greater anticipation. He had far less knowledge about God, and the future, than we do now, this side of the cross. He could point to God's character, his past actions of mercy by saving Israel from Egypt, or God saving him from Saul.

But we can point to the cross. To Jesus himself, God become man, experiencing the despair and turmoil that that we should have experienced. Experiencing the fierce wrath of God, all for us, all so we could know the assurance of his love, and be freed from that burden of coming judgement.

No longer do we need to dread God's anger. Jesus bore that for us, if we trust in him. No longer do we flood our bed with tears, anticipating judgement for sin. Now, all those in Christ, who've put their trust in him, can anticipate a glorious future.

This is the promise for those who trust in Christ. Do you have this hope? Is God for you, or against you? Have you come to Christ, or are you trying to manage life in your own strength, with no real confidence for the future? The Bible is brutally honest that life's full of difficulties. More importantly, it's honest about us, that we're full of sin and God is angry. But if we come to Jesus, we can find forgiveness for sins, and we'll have no reason to fear God's anger, because Jesus will have born it for us. Come to him now, and become a child of the God who cares for his people – so much so that his Son came to bear our greatest troubles.

But it's not only those big-picture issues that this Psalm speaks to. It speaks to every part of life. Rising energy costs, children who refuse to attend church, declining health, difficult workplace relationships. These things that threaten to send us to bed in tears, we can come to the Lord with them. Some of these things we might even interpret as God being angry with us – rightly or wrongly – we can come to the Lord with them.

He is full of hesed – goodness, mercy, steadfast love. He's shown us that especially at the cross, when he dealt with our greatest problem, sin. So how much more can we trust him with these other troubles? Yes, they're real problems. But God promises salvation from them.

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Will our financial woes disappear when we follow Jesus? No. Will everyone suddenly love us and broken relationships be healed the moment we put our faith in Christ? Clearly not. Things may even get worse for us in this life when we become a Christian.

But we can say with David, 'the LORD has heard my supplication; the LORD will receive my prayer.' Whatever we go through, we've already seen the extent that God will go to show his love for us, and to rescue us from what would otherwise overwhelm us. He's rescued us from judgement and hell, and even if we go through bankruptcy, and experience broken relationships, we can trust that they won't overwhelm us.

Maybe we will find relief in this life. We can pray for that. God can restore broken relationships, provide financial resources and bring physical healing.

But even if he doesn't right now, we're anticipating a world and an eternal life that'll be free from those troubles. We can hold tightly to those words of Paul in Romans 8: 'If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things. ... What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: For your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Come to the Lord in your despair and turmoil. When you feel God hasn't been pleased with you, come to him. When you've flooded your bed with your tears because of your troubles, come to him. Come confident, knowing that he will rescue you.