

Psalm 55

¹Listen to my prayer, O God,
do not ignore my plea;
²hear me and answer me.
My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught
³at the voice of the enemy,
at the stares of the wicked;
for they bring down suffering
upon me
and revile me in their anger.

⁴My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death assail me.
⁵Fear and trembling have beset
me;
horror has overwhelmed me.
⁶I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest -
⁷I would flee far away
and stay in the desert;
⁸I would hurry to my place of
shelter,
far from the tempest and
storm."

⁹Confuse the wicked, O Lord, confound
their speech,
for I see violence and strife in the city.
¹⁰Day and night they prowl about on its
walls;
malice and abuse are within it.
¹¹Destructive forces are at work in the city;
threats and lies never leave its streets.

¹²If an enemy were insulting me,
I could endure it;
if a foe were raising himself against me,
I could hide from him.
¹³But it is you, a man like myself,

my companion, my close friend,
¹⁴with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship
as we walked with the throng at the house of
God.
¹⁵Let death take my enemies by surprise;
let them go down alive to the grave,
for evil finds lodging among them.

¹⁶But I call to God,
and the LORD saves me.
¹⁷Evening, morning and noon
I cry out in distress,
and he hears my voice.
¹⁸He ransoms me unharmed
from the battle waged against me,
even though many oppose me.
¹⁹God, who is enthroned forever,
will hear them and afflict them - Selah
men who never change their ways
and have no fear of God.

²⁰My companion attacks his friends;
he violates his covenant.
²¹His speech is smooth as butter,
yet war is in his heart;
his words are more soothing than oil,
yet they are drawn swords.

²²Cast your cares on the Lord
and he will sustain you;
he will never let the righteous fall.
²³But you, O God, will bring down the
wicked
into the pit of corruption;
bloodthirsty and deceitful men
will not live out half their days.

But as for me, I trust in you.

How do you cope in a crisis? Kipling, of course, praised the manly virtue of the person who could keep his head when all about were losing theirs. Privately, I suspect, we all share his admiration for that kind of unruffled composure even if, unlike him, we don't think it's the prerogative of the male sex. If only we could sail through the storms of life, calm and serene. If only we could be one of those people who is able to sleep at night no matter what slings and arrows outrageous fortune may hurl into our path. That is all a big *if*, as Kipling himself implied by the title of that famous poem.

Most of us aren't like that. That is why managing directors command such high salaries. People who can cope with high levels of stress are a rarity. There is a shortage in the market for such people.

Indeed, if the truth be known, many who aspire to executive posts achieve their image of unflappable poise only by virtue of the tranquilizers they cram into the top drawer of their desk. Anxiety comes naturally to human beings. True we each have different tolerances; some of us are more vulnerable to pressure than others. But everybody's mental and emotional constitution has its limitations. You only have to study the incidence of combat fatigue in time of war to realize that. Nobody, no matter how courageous their spirit, is immune to the so-called nervous breakdown. If any of us are placed in a situation of sufficient stress, we will crack. And that goes for the Christian just as much as for the non-Christian.

There are some superspiritual types who want to deny that. Didn't Jesus rebuke his disciples for their worried frowns, didn't he chasten them by the example of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field for their pointless fretting? Of course he did. But if you think about it, the mere fact that he asks in that famous passage, 'Why do you worry?' is clear evidence of the fact that he knew we would suffer from anxiety. It may be incongruous for a Christian to worry; it may expose, as Jesus said, the shallowness of our faith, or the worldliness of our aspirations. But there is nothing about being a Christian that immunizes a person against the experience of anxiety. If there were, Jesus would never have had to bother talking about it. The truth is that Christians do battle with worry just as everybody else does. You only have to look into the experience of great saints, both in the Bible and outside it, to realize that. The difference faith makes is not that it renders us impervious to stress, but that it gives us an additional resource in time of stress, a resource that the believer has at his disposal which the unbeliever doesn't. It is a resource which in troubled circumstances can make the difference, to use Kipling's words, between keeping your head and losing it.

In Psalm 55 we have a perfect example of that resource being employed in one such crisis situation. It is clear from several of the things that David says in this psalm, that it was composed at a period of great personal insecurity in his life. He speaks repeatedly of enemies who are wickedly plotting his downfall. He speaks in particular of the treachery of one whom he had formerly regarded as a friend, but who now was apparently the ringleader of this callous conspiracy. It is difficult to be sure what particular incident in David's long and varied life might be in view. We know from the books of Samuel that for many years he was on the run from the jealous hatred of King Saul and undoubtedly there were critical moments of betrayal and danger during that time that might have provided the background for a psalm like this. But the mention of the word 'city' in verse 9 and again in verse 11 would argue against identifying the psalm with that early period of David's life. If the city in question is Jerusalem then it must come from the period after he had come to the throne of Israel when

Jerusalem had become his capital. And if so, then the most likely context of this psalm is during one of those many attempted coups that David suffered in the latter years of his reign. Perhaps the most likely candidate is the one when his own son, Absalom, conspired against him.

Whatever the precise situation was, David was in big trouble, and like anybody else in such a situation of stress, he is worried about it. Indeed, worry is perhaps too moderate a term, it would be closer to the mark to say he was in a state of total panic: 'My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling beset me; horror has overwhelmed me' (v.4-5). Maybe it is reassuring to some of us to know the extremity of emotional devastation that David felt. After all the man who slew Goliath was no coward. The man who wrote 'The Lord is my shepherd' had a close walk with God. If a man as brave and as spiritual as David could be victim to such an overwhelming attack of anxiety, then clearly no Christian need to feel guilty when they pass through a similar experience. Faith didn't immunize David against worry. Anxiety was still there in his repertoire of emotional response just as it is in everybody.

The resource of prayer

*Listen to my prayer, O God,
do not ignore my plea;
hear me and answer me.*

Prayer is the distinctive resource that the believer has that the unbeliever cannot share. I am not suggesting, of course, that if you are worrying about something, all you need to do is to recite a few sentences with the word 'Amen' on the end, and all those anxieties will automatically dissolve away. It wasn't like that for David, and it won't be like that for you and me. What I mean, when I say that prayer is a resource in these times of trouble and emotional crisis, is that prayer provides a context in which we can work through our anxieties and come to terms with them. Indeed, that is just what we see David doing in this psalm, in a particularly transparent manner. When you read the psalm you will see that there are a number of diverse elements in it, which seem to be thrown together in a rather haphazard way. There are sections that speak of intense fear and danger, like verses 4 and 5. There are sections that speak of David's hostility towards his enemies who were threatening him as in verses 9-11 or again in verses 12-15. There are sections that

speaking of David's grief at his friend's betrayal like verses 12-14 and again in verse 20-21. And mixed in with all these negative feelings, there are sections which confess great confidence in God. The interesting thing is that these elements are muddled up. David seems to swing wildly between them. Sometimes he almost breaks off in mid-sentence and launches on a different tack so the reader is left suspended in mid-air. There is no logical, clear development through this psalm. Panic and sorrow, anger and faith do battle in the text. The poet seems to rebound from one emotion to another, a bit like a football in a school playground.

Predictably, there are a number of Old Testament scholars who observe this disjointedness and conclude that the text is dislocated. The psalm has been cut up, added to, pulled around and generally massacred by so many authors and editors, that it looks more like a pastiche of fragments, stuck with glue in a scrapbook, than a single, coherent and carefully constructed poem. Quite frankly, scholars like that just need to get their noses out of their Hebrew lexicons and into a bit of pastoral counselling! For if they did that, they would quickly realize that the erratic oscillations that characterize this psalm represent precisely the sort of collision of contradictory emotions which mark anybody passing through a situation of extreme stress.

Of course the psalm lacks logical coherence; at this particular point in his life, David lacked logical coherence! He was a seething mass of inner confusion. He tells us himself: 'My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught' (verse 2). This psalm wasn't written by David in the calm tranquillity of hindsight; this psalm was written with the thunder and lightning of his agonised emotions bursting around his head. This isn't a man reflecting on the experience of anxiety after the trouble is all over, this is a man actually wrestling with the experience of anxiety in the midst of trouble. That is what makes the psalm so peculiarly interesting. It isn't just telling us that prayer can make a difference when we are experiencing trouble. It shows us how prayer did make a difference to a man who was in trouble. It is a model to us of prayer at work in a crisis experience. These ill-shaped elements that alternate so wildly are not evidence of textual dislocation at all, they are the clue to a proper understanding of the psalm and a proper emotional engagement with David in his writing of it. Here is a man struggling with a torrent of feelings that deluge him one after another. But he is not struggling with them as an unbeliever must in the isolation of his own private hell. Instead, David is struggling with these feelings as only a believer can, in the intimate, one-to-one relationship of his prayer-life with God. The reason this psalm is included in the Psalter is because he wants to commend such a policy to us that we may share his discovery. Verse 22 is the key: 'Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you', he says, 'just as he sustained me.'

Let's pick out just two of those diverse elements we have noted that fly around inside this psalm: fear and hostility. Let's see just how David prayed through each of them.

1. Feelings of fear

*My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught
³at the voice of the enemy,
at the stares of the wicked;
for they bring down suffering upon me
and revile me in their anger.*

*⁴My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death assail me.
⁵Fear and trembling have beset me;
horror has overwhelmed me.*

Quite clearly this was not a mild attack of nerves. This is what a 20th century psychiatrist would label as an acute anxiety attack. All the symptoms are there. For a start there is mental confusion. The Hebrew of verse 2 conveys the idea of thoughts madly rushing about, a kind of distracted restlessness. Anxiety always generates such bewilderment. 'I can't concentrate,' we say, 'I'm in a spin, my mind is racing.' Habitual suspiciousness is another common characteristic: '...the voice of the enemy, the states of the wicked; for they bring down suffering upon me and revile me in their anger' (v.3). David's awareness of the palace plot was breeding paranoia in him. He felt as though he were surrounded by a sea of secret antagonism and ill will. Wherever he went he sensed people's eyes upon him. He heard them whispering their conspiracy against him behind his back.

Then there is the emotional torture that he describes in verses 4 and 5. David piles word upon word here, to try to express the intensity of his inner pain. 'My heart is in anguish,' 'terror of death', 'fear', 'trembling', 'horror'. Literally what he says in verse 4 in the Hebrew is 'My heart writhes in my guts'. It is as if all his inner organs have twisted themselves into knots. The awful foreboding of imminent death hangs over him like a sword of Damocles. 'I feel as if at any moment I am going to be struck down dead, and as a result I am jumpy, I am irritable. I can't sleep, I am breaking out in cold sweats, my heartbeat is irregular, my stomach is brewing ulcers, my blood pressure is sky-high, my head aches.' This is what anxiety feels like and David knows it. Only those who have gone through such a dreadful experience can know how tormenting it is. Several people I have talked to who have had this sort of acute anxiety attack have told me they would, quite seriously, rather die, than have a recurrence.

The desire to escape

So it is no wonder that all David can think of is escape.

*⁶I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest -
⁷I would flee far away
and stay in the desert;
⁸I would hurry to my place of shelter,
far from the tempest and storm."*

This is really so characteristic of an anxiety state that I am quite sure that any who have passed through such an experience will be quietly nodding to themselves as they read it. 'I must get away,' says David, 'I can't take this constant pressure of worry and anxiety any more. I must find relief or I shall go mad.' Yet, paradoxically, it is that imperative desire for escape that represents one of the most dangerous dimensions of anxiety.

Up to a point, escape is a necessary and a normal response to worry. We all escape in a sense without realizing it, every night when we go to sleep and dream. Dreams constitute a kind of safety valve; they purge the emotional pressure from our lives. In more conscious ways, too, we escape: when we take our annual holiday; when we play sport; when we read a book or go and watch a film. But it is characteristic of all those safe modes of escape that the situation generating the anxiety is only temporarily abandoned. We waken out of our dream; we return from our holiday; we emerge from the football stadium or the cinema and we face real life again. We haven't run away from the problem totally, just taken a therapeutic break from it.

That's good, but when anxiety is really acute, there is a temptation to flee our problem permanently. We may, for instance, try to perpetuate a dream state in our waking moments, through alcohol or narcotics. In some cases, people try to perpetuate the holiday mood by dropping out of society, or falling into a 'fugue' state of spontaneous amnesia. Most commonly we simply try to deny our anxious feelings altogether, to block the whole painful business from our thoughts, to switch off that bit of circuitry in our brain. This is what psychiatrists mean when they talk about repressing anxiety into the subconscious.

Such strategies of total escape are very tempting, but they are always self-defeating because, of course, you can't run away from your feelings. Your feelings are part of you. When we try to build a barricade between ourselves and our feelings, all we are really doing is creating a kind of inner

alienation within ourselves and that generates more problems than it solves. What happens for instance, when we repress anxiety and won't face up to it, is that it corrodes our peace of mind like a kind of psychological acid. Some people get depressed, some people become hypochondriac, some people develop irrational phobias or psychosomatic illness and so on. Though we may want to flee our anxious feelings, escape is no real answer and to give David credit, in this particular crisis, he recognized as much: 'A dove maybe could find refuge in this situation, but a human being can't,' he says. 'If I were a dove, I would fly away.' Yet it is all hypothetical for the fact is I am stuck here with no way out. Much as I might want to escape, I can't.

Prayer - God's listening ear

This is the first reason prayer was so important for him. It provided a forum in which he could verbalize his frustration about being trapped in the situation. Prayer saved David from the need to repress his anxiety and it provided him with a way of expressing it. There is a great deal of truth in the old maxim that a trouble shared is a trouble halved. Often the thing we will do, on a human level, when we have got anxieties, is to find somebody we can talk to about it because that eases the problem. But sometimes, of course, there isn't anybody around with whom we can share our trouble; we feel isolated in our distress just as David did. We feel that there is nobody we can trust. That is when the believer has his extra resource; he is never totally alone; he is never without a sympathetic ear into which he can pour the sorry tale of his anguish. He has God's ear: 'Listen to my prayer, O God; do not ignore my plea. Hear me and answer me.' Prayer gives us access to the best listener in the world.

David says in verse 17: 'Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice.' Derek Kidner suggests in his little commentary, that the reference to morning, noon and night may be more than just a poetic idiom. He feels it may reflect a literal discipline of prayer that David imposed upon himself during this crisis period, like Daniel who opened his window and got down on his knees three times a day to pray. Maybe that is right. Certainly, there can be no question that David found in

regular and frequent times of prayer, a means by which he could work through the anxiety that was threatening to destroy him.

The same can be true for us. This is what Paul wrote in Philippians 4:6-7:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

He is not saying that we should feel guilty as Christians, because we are anxious. What he is saying is that when Christians are anxious, they have a resource to which they can turn which the unbeliever doesn't have - prayer. Make use of it! It is not that the Christian is incapable of anxiety but that he knows what to do about his feelings of anxiety. He has somewhere he can work them through. He doesn't have to repress them; he doesn't have to escape them. He can talk about them to God and that is exactly what we see David doing here. I expect as David walked around his palace you would never have guessed the inner anguish that was going on inside him. I bet you would have thought 'Wow! What a calm, composed fellow he is!' But if you saw David on his own, on his knees, you would discover the secret of that composure: 'Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you.'

2. Feelings of hostility

⁹*Confuse the wicked, O Lord, confound their speech,
for I see violence and strife in the city.*

¹⁰*Day and night they prowl about on its walls;
malice and abuse are within it.*

¹¹*Destructive forces are at work in the city;
threats and lies never leave its streets.*

¹⁵*Let death take my enemies by surprise;
let them go down alive to the grave,
for evil finds lodging among them.*

There are many examples of verses like this in the psalms: imprecatory cries for vengeance. Many people profess to find it a problem that such sentiments should be expressed in the Bible. Surely, they say, this kind of vindictiveness is out of keeping with what the Bible has to say about loving one another and forgiving our enemies. There are several things, arising from this psalm, that can be said in response to that.

David's enemies were God's enemies

The first thing to note is that David is calling down judgment on these individuals, not because they

are his enemies, primarily, but because they are God's enemies. Notice, for instance, in verses 10-11 the concern for social justice which is informing his indignation. There is violence and strife in the city, he says. It's not just against me, it is infecting society. Day and night violence and strife are prowling about on its walls; malice and abuse are within it; destructive forces are at work in the city; threats and lies never leave its streets. It is quite clear that this conspiracy against David was having a demoralizing effect on the whole community. Acts of terrorism, intimidation and corruption were undermining the fabric of law and order. It is often the way, revolution and anarchy are blood-brothers. David sees their affiliation working out in his beloved city of Jerusalem and that outrages him.

It should outrage us, too. The idea that anger is necessarily a sinful emotion is quite mistaken; on the contrary, there are things it would be sinful not to be angry about. We ought to be angry at cruelty, at injustice, at exploitation. It is no virtue to be complacent, apathetic or indifferent in the face of such things. You have only to remember how Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the Temple to be clear about that. Righteousness was the fundamental issue in David's mind too, not personal pique or insecurity.

God's judgment on sin

The second thing to note is that David is really only asking God to act here in a way that is consistent with his judgment against sin down through history. In fact, David, in this psalm makes two oblique allusions to actual incidents in the Old Testament.

First, in verse 9 he says: 'Confuse the wicked, O Lord, confound their speech.' That may very well be a reference to the Tower of Babel and the judgment that God brought upon it. There God frustrated the dangerous ambition of godless men by erecting communication barriers between them and setting them at cross-purposes to one another. 'You did that once, God,' David is saying, 'well, do it again, because I can see the same kind of reckless evil at work in my society as threatened Babel.' Second, in verse 15 he says: 'Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the grave.' That too is, almost certainly, a reference to the judgment of Korah in the book of Numbers. Korah rebelled against Moses and he was swallowed by some kind of fissure in the earth as punishment. David is again saying, 'You did it once, God, do it again, because exactly the same kind of rebellion against the authorities that you have appointed is going on now.'

Down through history God has been active repeatedly in judgment against unrighteousness in men.

Again and again, what David says in verse 23 has proved to be true: ‘... you, O God, will bring down the wicked... blood-thirsty and deceitful men will not live out half their days.’ And David is asking no more than that God should vindicate himself against wickedness in the same kind of way he had always done. We must not confuse love for our enemies with sentimentality about moral evil and the reality of divine judgment. God does judge. It was Jesus himself who said, echoing David, that those who live by the sword, die by the sword. Such is the nature of the moral universe God has made.

More than feelings

The third thing about these imprecatory comments we find here, is that the anger and hostility that David felt, even insofar as it did focus around his own sense of injury, was not just an irrational feeling. It is not as if David was flying off the handle without good cause. It is quite clear that he had been treated abominably. That comes out most clearly in those verses which speak of his grief at the involvement of his friend in this conspiracy.

¹²*If an enemy were insulting me,
I could endure it;
if a foe were raising himself against me,
I could hide from him.*
¹³*But it is you, a man like myself,
my companion, my close friend,
¹⁴with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship
as we walked with the throng at the house of God.*

There is pathos in these words. Someone very close indeed to David was involved, and if our earlier speculation was right about the identity of this traitor, it adds even more poignancy to the situation. What if, when David speaks in verse 13 of a ‘man like myself’ he were referring to none other than Prince Absalom, his own son? He was clearly somebody David was fond of. A colleague in his royal administration or a comrade with whom he had shared much of his life at the very least. Indeed, it was a person he thought was a believer like him. They had gone to worship together so often, yet now this closest of friends had let him down. The promise of fidelity that they had made to one another was shattered. Though he was maintaining an appearance of courtesy and benevolence towards David, David knew it wasn’t sincere any longer.

²⁰*My companion attacks his friends;
he violates his covenant.*
²¹*His speech is smooth as butter,
yet war is in his heart;
his words are more soothing than oil,
yet they are drawn swords.*

It doesn't take much to imagine how painful this was for David. Maybe some of us have been betrayed by people we were fond of in that same way. Our parents, perhaps; we felt rejected by them. A husband or wife perhaps; they have been untrue to us. Few things inflict such a blow to our self-esteem as to be badly treated by those we thought loved us. When that rejection and infidelity is cloaked in deliberate deception and callous cruelty as it was here, the emotional injury is almost unbearable.

At least Julius Caesar hadn't the least knowledge of Brutus' part in the plot against his life until the moment of his assassination. Poor old David here is having to live with this facade of friendliness day in and day out, knowing it all to be a sham. He can only wait for the moment when this so-called pal of his would make his move and try to stab him in the back. 'I can handle naked enmity and aggression,' says David. 'I am a soldier, I understand war, but when the warfare concerned is hidden in the heart behind a veil of smooth talk and gushing amiability, it chokes me up.'

In circumstances like that, hostility and anger are just reactions. Even if we may wish to argue that they fall below the example of Jesus, we can't blame David for feeling hostile, when he has been abused in this way.

The context of prayer

The fourth, and perhaps the most important thing about these difficult, vengeful paragraphs, is that these hostile sentiments occur in the context of David's private prayers, not in the context of his public actions. That is really very significant. We don't have to read much of David's life history to appreciate how far from vindictiveness he really was. There have been few men, of his day or since, who have shown such generosity to their foes. Recall, for instance, the times he spared the life of Saul his enemy. David repeatedly refused to accept the opportunities fate gave him to dispose of this murderous maniac. Again and again David showed mercy when you would have thought political advantage was to be gained by surrendering to revenge (e.g. 1 Samuel 24:1-7; 26:5-12).

Or consider how he reacted over the incident of Absalom. When the news arrived that the rebellion had been crushed, and that Absalom had been killed, there was no 'serves him right!' attitude. David, we are told, was visibly shaken. He went up to his private room, crying as he did so, 'Absalom, my son; Absalom, my son. If only I died instead of you, Absalom' (2 Samuel 18:31- 19:8). David was not a spiteful man. In public actions, he was most extraordinarily long-suffering.

How then are we to square the way he actually treated his enemies with these imprecatory sentiments in his psalms? Some will say that they are simply inconsistent. But a better response is to see these psalms as the psychological explanation of David's generosity of spirit. David wasn't an inhibited wimp who was incapable of feeling angry and hostile towards those who abused him. He felt furious just as any of us would. But instead of working out that rage through concrete acts of public spite, David worked those feelings through in intense moments of private prayer.

Dealing with anger

This is so important. Psychiatrists have come to realise that anger is an immensely destructive emotion and lies behind a great deal of the depression and anxiety that people suffer. Richard Winter, in his very useful book, *The Roots of Sorrow*, points out that until recently most psychiatrists were of the view that the only thing you could do with anger was to ventilate it: break a few plates, shout and scream, pummel a cushion, anything to get it off your chest. In fact, there are many psychotherapies that are practised today which are designed to help people to 'get in touch with their feelings', in exactly this kind of way.

And there is no doubt that some kind of emotional catharsis is often necessary when feelings of hostility have been bottled up for a long while. But the problem is that more recent research has shown that, far from diffusing anger, these kinds of ventilating techniques often simply inflame anger. For instance, children encouraged to get rid of pent-up anger by kicking the furniture become more aggressive, not less, as time goes by. Couples who yell at one another don't feel less angry at the end of the week, they often feel more angry. For ventilation, all too often, simply fosters a settled habit of hostility and instead of purging the grudge, it reinforces it.

What is needed is some way for a person to express their anger without fuelling it in the process. And that is precisely what David found in his prayer-times. Some may feel that Jesus would never have prayed like this. Jesus would never have said, 'Let death take my enemies by surprise, and let them go down alive to the grave.' And they're right, Jesus wouldn't. But David wasn't Jesus, and neither are we. Angry feelings are part of us. You may argue that they should not be part of us and in an ideal world, perhaps, they would not. But the fact is they are there, and we have to do something with them. Bottling them up or denying that they exist, is not the answer.

What David did was to express privately, in his prayers, exactly how he felt. That's what these imprecatory paragraphs are. 'Sometimes I want to see my enemies dead,' says David. If he had been a better man maybe he wouldn't have felt like that, but the truth was he did feel like that, just as we all

feel like it sometimes. And nothing is to be gained by the pious pretence that we don't. Just as with his experience of fear and panic, prayer was providing David with a context in which he could express rather than repress those negative feelings that were being aroused by his situation of crisis and trouble.

Notice how in verse 13 he imaginatively enters into a dialogue with his treacherous friend, though clearly his friend is absent. 'It's you,' he says. 'A man like myself.' He is picturing his friend in front of his eyes as he is praying. For a moment the fact that David is praying to God seems to be almost forgotten. David is saying to his friend, through prayer, what in real life he couldn't say to him. Sometimes that is what prayer can be for us, and ought to be for us. There are times when we need to say things to people that we can't say; things that would be better left unsaid, but which from our point of view, need to be spoken. The unbeliever has nowhere to say them, except perhaps to his psychotherapist. David found, in prayer the place he could do it. This is what David is inviting us to do when he says, 'Cast your cares on the Lord.'

If we are actually passing through a period of emotional crisis right now, I want to suggest that this psalm is of immense relevance. The feelings of panic and hostility that David is talking about are far from rare, lots and lots of people suffer from them. He wants us to know the same experience which he found in wrestling with those feelings. 'Cast your cares on the Lord,' he says, 'and he will sustain you.' The problem with many of us is that we haven't learned how to do that. A friend of mine, in Nairobi, was driving a truck out in the bush one day when he met an old Kikuyu woman who was carrying a huge bundle of firewood on her head. It was clearly very heavy and she was tired, so my friend stopped the truck and asked her if she would like a lift. He was highly amused when he looked in the mirror after she had got on board. There she was sitting in the back of the truck, with the bundle of wood still on her head! That is a picture, very often, of us. For some reason we don't want to cast our burden away. We nurse our negative feelings; we keep them till they become a great untameable monster in our imagination. David is showing us here how to use our prayer-relationship with God in a situation of crisis to earth that emotional electricity, safely and harmlessly.

Some Christian counsellors recommend that people going through emotional crises should write a letter to God. Express to him the feelings that are bottled up inside of you; the feelings that perhaps you don't really want to look in the face. The hostility you feel, perhaps, that you can't possibly talk about because the person to whom it is directed is a member of your family, or close friend. Write it down in a private letter to God. That guilt you feel, deriving from failures in the past or maybe in the

present, that makes you feel so dirty. You couldn't possibly admit it to anybody else. Write it down. Those memories that you dare not recall to mind because the moment your mind starts moving towards them, the pain is too great to bear. Force yourself to write it down. When you have finished your letter to God, offer it to him. Ask him to take it and deal with it. 'Cast your cares on the Lord and he will hold you up.'

Just a crutch?

Possibly there are some reading this chapter whose reaction will be one of quiet cynicism. 'It is just as I thought; these Christians are a load of emotional inadequates. They can't get through life without a psychological crutch. They are so burdened by their anxiety-feelings they can't cope with them. They have to have a father-figure to lean on to get them through.' I have met people who feel it is an evidence of weakness to pray. It stops people relying on themselves and being strong.

If that is how you feel, I want you to come with me to a garden. There is a man in the garden and just like David he is broken by inner conflict and by seething emotions. Just like David, he is being betrayed by one of his closest friends. Just like David, he has looked around the city of Jerusalem and he has wept for he has felt the weight of human sin and wickedness in that place. What is he doing? He is praying. Is he a cowardly wimp then? Is that your verdict? A man who needs the crutch of God to get him through this hour of crisis? Is he to be scorned for the immaturity of his infantile dependencies because at that moment in his life we find him saying 'Father'?

No, I tell you this is the strongest man, the most 'human' being that has ever walked the face of this globe. Of all men, this is the man we should most like to emulate. If he needed to pray, if he said to his disciples, 'Watch and pray,' how can you say you can do without it?

Sooner or later, in the life of every single human being, there comes a moment when we know we need to pray. A moment of personal crisis when prayer ceases to be a mere childhood habit or religious formality and becomes an emotional and spiritual lifeline. It may be, as in David's case, a situation of intense danger, a heart attack perhaps. It may be a period of devastating loss, a

bereavement. It may be a moment of broken-hearted despair or humiliating guilt or paralysing fear. However and whenever that personal crisis comes, one such experience at least comes to every one of us, when we desperately need to pray.

The question David has for us in this psalm is quite simple. When that moment comes for us, as it certainly came for him, will we know how to pray? Will we know how to cast our cares on the Lord? We can do without prayer if we insist upon it; God isn't going to force us to cast our cares on him. If we insist on living our lives in our own strength, with our own resources, he is not going to stop us. But are we so sure that our resources can cope? How do you cope with a crisis?