

Text: Psalm 86

Theme: Strength for the Journey

Sermon delivered by Dele Agbelusi on 30/11/08 at 5pm.

The bible is full of examples of people who come under severe pressures and stresses during their lifetime. These pressures come in various forms – ill health, unemployment, change of house, backsliding into sin, bullying from work colleagues or family members, rejection by close relations, etc. There is hardly anyone who is immune. So, how do we cope when we come under such thick clouds of human experience?

We will turn to someone who has gone through these unpleasant motions but has proved through his own experience that there is a way out. That person is King David and we are going to focus on his prayer and praise in Psalm 86.

For our discussion, we will divide the Psalm into 3 parts:

vv. 1-7, vv. 8-13 and vv.14-17 where each section is shaped by the overwhelming belief in the sovereignty of God.

Verses 1-7

v.1 Listen, (bow down) your ear O Lord, hear me. In condescension to my littleness, and in pity to my weakness, bow down your ear and listen to me. When a little boy says Dad, I have something to tell you. The tall big daddy usually bows to the level of the child to have eye contact with him. Let us picture this in our minds as consider the Psalmist's petition. "When our prayers are low from humility, or weak from sickness, or without wings from depression, the Lord will bow down. The infinitely exalted Jehovah will listen to our prayers." (Spurgeon).

v.2 Sometimes our trouble or pain is so great that all we can do is cry out to God for protection. And often, when there is no relief in sight, we can only acknowledge the greatness of God and wait for better days ahead. The conviction that God answers prayer will sustain us in such difficult times.

There is nothing like a good dose of pressure which propels us into prayer. Is there? And in this sense, believe it or not, it is a blessing in disguise because the experience of pressure has succeeded in drawing us close to the throne of God.

Why should God listen to me?

- For I am poor and needy (v.1) – I am without a supply for my needs. Our distress is a forcible reason for being heard by the merciful and gracious Lord God.
- For I am set apart for holy use – I am your child.
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God hears and answers prayer because of His nature (v.5). He is forgiving and good and abounds in love to **all** who call to Him. Not just those who have big or great faith, or perhaps those who know the right biblical words of Scripture to use in composing their prayers, but **all** who having entered into a relationship with Him call out to Him

in prayer. We humans may stand on our dignity and feel used when someone only turns to us when in trouble, but not this God. He is forgiving and good and willing to “bow down His ear” to my cry (v.6).

But is this listening aspect sufficient for the needs of the moment? The Psalmist answers the question in vv. 8-13 where God now takes the centre stage instead of the Psalmist and his woes. He is presented as the all powerful one who provides the perspective which changes the Psalmist’s outlook and which eventually leads to praise.

Verses 8-10

Among the gods, there’s none like you, O sovereign. Even if the heathen idols were gods, none of them could be likened to you in power, in character because you are the self-existent all creating God of Israel. You have made all the nations, even those who have been deceived by the heathen gods of this world, and they will at last discover your greatness and they will give you worship.

The true God is incomparable and he rules. If nothing else the current global economic woes have exposed how vulnerable even the mightiest nations are. Nobody could foresee what was coming, even our financial experts. All our petty gods-wealth, pension funds, fame, power have all developed weak knees. Now do you honestly think that God is going to be caught out at any point like that and say ‘Oops I missed that one.’? Of course not. One day all of these powers which oppress God’s servants, are going to bow before him and give an account to him and so bring glory to him. They are the pawns if you like, not us and we need to keep reminding ourselves of this fact, because events might have us believe otherwise. That is why we need to have passages like this opened to us and why we need to keep encouraging each other on with this view of reality because no one else is going to. **And this is what true prayer always does, it shifts our gaze away from the problems and brings us face to face with the Lord.** Our difficulty is that we try to sort things out all by ourselves don’t we? We have a problem and we keep going back to it, analysing it and going round and round and down and down. But like David we have to admit that the problem is simply too much for us, that we are at a loss and only a sovereign God can handle it- ‘working everything for the good of those who love him.’

When we are in distress and under pressure it is so easy to think that someone else is in charge and we may react to perceived ‘other people’s agenda’. This passage tells us something quite different. God is in charge.

(v.10) David previously said God is good(v.5), in verse 10 he acknowledges His greatness. It is a grand thing when greatness and goodness are united. If a king is great without being good, he will be a tyrant and if he is good without being great he may be unable to protect his subjects. Thank God we have a King in whom the two attributes are blended and so we are safe. You alone are God. Our God is not to be worshipped as one among many good and true beings but as God alone. “His gospel is not to be preached as one of several saving systems but as the only way of salvation.” (Spurgeon)

(v11). So teach me your way, especially now that I am confused, perplexed and in trouble. Please show me the way that your wisdom has prepared for my escape out of my web of sorrow and conflict. Do not give me my way, but teach me your way. I will follow you and not be wilful. When taught, I will practise what I know. Your word will not just be for mere doctrine to me, but a matter of daily life.

(v.12) Having taught me one way, your way, give me one heart, not a divided heart, because a person with a divided heart is weak and unstable (cf James 1:6). And with this one heart, I will praise your holy name and glorify you for evermore.

Let me give you an example of the effects of an undivided heart forged in the crucible of pressure. It is the martyrdom of Polycarp, one of the early fathers of the Christian Church. History tells it that he was a direct pupil of the apostle John. Polycarp lived between 70 and 155 A.D., connecting him to both the biblical apostles and the age of the early church fathers. Polycarp's greatest contribution to Christianity may be his martyred death. His martyrdom stands as one of the most well documented events of antiquity. The emperors of Rome had unleashed bitter attacks against the Christians during this period, and members of the early church recorded many of the persecutions and deaths. Polycarp was arrested on the charge of being a Christian -- a member of a politically dangerous cult whose rapid growth needed to be stopped. Amidst an angry mob, the Roman proconsul took pity on such a gentle old man and urged Polycarp to proclaim, "Caesar is Lord". If only Polycarp would make this declaration and offer a small pinch of incense to Caesar's statue he would escape torture and death. To this Polycarp responded, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" Steadfast in his stand for Christ, Polycarp refused to compromise his beliefs, and thus, was burned alive at the stake. Polycarp's oneness with God ruled his actions and his mode of seeing things. Polycarp knew of the great love God has for him, because he knew Jesus who had delivered him from the grave. That is the confidence shown in verse 13. That is why the psalmist or Polycarp was not afraid of death. They saw things differently, living with God and for God (compare with Stephen speech in Acts 7:59-60; Philip 1:21; Rom.6:8-10).

Verses 14-17

The result of this confidence is shown in the petition and perseverance in vv 14-17. Now the circumstances may not have changed but then again the Psalmist can testify that neither has God changed. Before him is the renewed vision of God who is compassionate and gracious. It is similar to the experience of Job in Job 42. After God has spoken, in spite of the fact that Job's situation had not changed, he became a different person. He had caught a fresh vision of the greatness and glory and goodness of God. Read Job 42:2-3 : "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted...Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. David is enabled to persevere and go on, not giving up. He asks for strength and mercy in **v16**- not for a way out of the troubles but for grace to endure a way through them. But he also asks for something else. Did you notice it in **v17**? 'Give me a sign of your goodness that my enemies may see it and be put to shame, for you O LORD, have helped me and comforted me.' The Psalmist is not asking a sign out of unbelief but out of faith. If the sign is given, he believes, it will take the wind out of the enemies' sails. And we can testify that one of the greatest signs of God's goodness

is the fact that we are brought to God in prayer through pressure. For instead of giving up on God and saying “why me”, we humbly come to Him and say “why not”. The fact that you are listening to me tonight is a sign of God’s love for you.

But the greatest sign of all is the sign of God’s son who died on the cross. This man came and lived as God expects man to live. He taught God’s truth, healed the sick and his heart was never at any moment divided. It was in oneness with God. And yet, in God’s providence, He allowed him to be killed. His death becomes a guarantee for my life. And he is the one who is at the right side of the father and lovingly bends his ear to hear my prayer when I call upon him. He is the sign of my redemption, my healing, my deliverance and my guarantee of eternal life.