

# Facing suffering...

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     John Milton is a poet who once wrote this. He said, the mind is its own place and in itself can make heaven of hell and a hell of heaven.

I'll read it again. The mind is its own place and in itself can make heaven of hell and a hell of heaven. See, what he's saying is that how we go through life, how we deal with this life has a lot to do with how we think about it.

How our minds process the situations we're in. That our minds actually have the power to see bad situations in a positive light. And on the other hand, also to see good situations negatively, so much so that how we face a situation in our lives is actually more important than the situation itself.

If you think about it. And so I want to ask you this morning, how do you face bad situations in your life? How do you face difficulty? How do you deal with trouble?

How do you deal with suffering when it comes? It's a very important question to ask. We often don't think enough about how we deal with suffering because in our culture, all we want to do is avoid suffering at all costs.

[ 1 : 1 5 ]     So we don't even think about how we're going to deal with it when it comes. Most of us would probably admit we don't actually have the first clue about how to deal with trouble, how to look positively on bad situations in life.

We don't deal very well with trials and hardship, do we, in our lives? I know I don't. Well, Psalm 4 is in our Bibles to teach us how Christians are meant to deal with trouble.

Because let me tell you, and I'm sorry to spoil your Sunday morning, you're going to have trouble in life. You're going to face hardships. You're going to face trials and suffering, whether you like it or not.

Because this world is a broken world, and nobody is immune to trouble, nobody is immune to suffering. But it's here in Psalm 4, and we praise God that we have psalms like this in the Bible.

It's here that we find out how we can face difficulties in life, and still, in our minds and in our hearts and in our deepest being, we can still experience peace. Peace.

[ 2 : 1 7 ]     Even in the midst of suffering. That's what the psalm's about. Because have a look, David, the writer, is in a time of trouble. We see that right at the beginning. He says to God, give me relief from my distress.

He's in a place of distress. He's having some kind of distress in his life. But then, I want you to look right at the bottom of the psalm in verse 8. Look at what he says there. He says, in peace, I lie down and sleep.

David's in great distress, and yet he ends the psalm by saying, I lie and sleep in peace. He's got peace. You see, and it's in the course of this psalm we find out how he went from a place of distress and trouble to a place of real peace.

And how we can do that as well. How we can find that peace, even when we face trouble in life. Because we all need that. Because we'll all face trouble sooner or later. And I know for a fact many of you sitting here this morning are facing trouble right now.

In one way or another. Whether it's in relationships or financial distress or medical reasons. Your health, your suffering. And so, it's important that all of us need to find the same peace.

[ 3 : 21 ] Which we can as God's people. As David found. The same peace. And we see how in the psalm. So, let's begin by looking at how David starts. And he starts with a prayer.

And so, we see David's prayer firstly. Which really isn't surprising if you think about it for someone who's facing a difficult situation. The truth is, it doesn't take much to pray in a difficult situation.

In a time of trouble. It's far more difficult to pray when things are going well. Than to pray when things aren't going well, isn't it? I mean, when you're sick or you're facing an exam.

Or you're in a dangerous situation. You don't need to read a book on how to pray. It comes naturally. It's the most natural thing in the world. To pray when we're in trouble. And here's David.

In a distressing situation. And so, naturally, he prays. But, his prayer is not the same as how anybody else might pray in a troubling situation. I want you to see how his prayer is in fact quite different.

[ 4 : 18 ] From how other people might just pray in difficulty. And the first thing we need to know about David's prayer. And it's important that we know this is David praying.

Is that his prayer is not a last resort prayer. You know what I mean? When I say last resort prayer. Lots of people pray last resort prayers. Like Alan mentioned earlier.

The kind of prayer. Well, nothing else has worked. I may as well pray as a last resort to God. But not David. You see, God is not David's last resort. And what we need to understand is that David prays here.

But it's in the context of an already existing, deep, intimate relationship that he already has with God. We see that in the rest of the Psalms. That's why it's important not just to take a psalm in isolation.

We've got to understand it in the context of the other psalms. Especially the ones that David prays in this case. And many of the psalms are prayers of David. Especially in the first fifth of the book of Psalms.

[ 5 : 18 ] By the way, Psalms is divided into five books. And they each have a slightly different theme. And lots of the prayers in lots of the psalms in the first book are prayers of David.

And they serve as models for our own prayers. Often we don't know how to pray. We don't know what to pray for. Well, the psalms are a great resource to help us to see what David and the other godly people prayed for.

So we can know where our hearts should be focused in prayer. But the thing we notice about David's prayers in the psalms, and this is important for each of us, is that he doesn't only pray to God when he needs something.

We notice that over and over again. He doesn't only pray to God when he's in trouble. When you look through the psalms, you find that David is often in a good space in life, but he's just praying prayers of thanks to God.

Just pure thanks to God. Sometimes he's struggling with sin and he just prays prayers of confession. He doesn't need anything necessarily from God, but he just wants to open his heart out to God and say sorry.

[ 6 : 19 ] It's a relationship. You see, his prayers are characteristic of a real relationship. He even prays prayers of frustration. You often find entire psalms just devoted to David venting to God and telling God the frustrations in his life, just letting out what he's feeling.

And sometimes it's just prayers of worship where David is just awed as he meditates on God, and he just wants to worship God, and he just wants to give God the glory and the attention that God deserves.

And you see, we need to make sure that's a model for our praying, that when we pray, we're not just coming to God to ask him for stuff, but we're praying like David. I mean, imagine, imagine for a second that your loved one, maybe your spouse or your child or someone you love, only ever spoke to you when they needed something.

I mean, what kind of relationship would that be? We can't have that kind of relationship with God. And so that's why David serves as a model for how to relate to God in prayer.

When David asks God for help, you see, it's in the context of an already existing relationship he had, and that's vital to understand. And because he had that real relationship with God, I now want you to look at what he could pray in verse 1.

[ 7 : 36 ] He prayed, Answer me when I call to you my righteous God. And it's important there that it's not just righteous God. It's my righteous God.

You see, to David, God wasn't just some distant creator and ruler of the universe who he hoped would hear him. No, to David, the God he was praying to was his God personally.

He had a personal relationship with God, and that made all the difference to David. But that was one of the key factors in contributing to the fact that he could go to a place of peace, is because he had this personal, real relationship with God that he knew personally.

He wasn't just this distant God. To give you an illustration, when I was in primary school, our teachers gave us the exercise of writing a fan mail, writing a letter to whoever we could, a famous person.

It had to be a famous person, and we had to post it off to get the experience of writing fan mail. And I decided to write a letter to my favorite actor at the time, who was Arnold Schwarzenegger. And I told him, I wrote in this letter, how I was his biggest fan, and I watched all his movies, and I told him all my favorite scenes, and all the things I loved.

[ 8 : 51 ] And I sent this letter off, and I was quite disappointed that he never wrote back to me. Even though, in the back of my mind, I didn't really expect him to.

I was hoping he would, but I mean, he's Arnold Schwarzenegger, he's probably got other fans, he's probably quite busy, and he doesn't have time to answer all his fan mail. So, in the back of my mind, I knew that he probably wouldn't answer me.

But you know what, I think that's how a lot of people pray to God, isn't it? I pray to God, but in the back of my mind, I'm never really expecting him to answer me. He's too busy running the universe.

I mean, what does he care about me? Don't we often think that, even if we don't articulate it? I wonder if that's how you pray, often. Hoping, hoping that God would answer your prayer, but not really, really expecting him to.

You know, wouldn't it be great if he did, but he probably won't. Is that how you pray? I think we often, often pray like that. Well, not David. You see, David, he approaches God, not hoping maybe that God will answer him, but confident that God will hear him.

[ 9 : 58 ] Look at verse 3. That's why he says in verse 3, know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself. The Lord hears when I call to him. David knew that because of his special relationship with God, God would not ignore him.

He knew confidently that God would hear him. And it's there in verse 3, he uses the personal name of God, Yahweh, which is translated, the English word, Lord, with capital letters.

Wherever you see Lord with capital letters, in your Bible, it means the personal name of God, Yahweh. And so, David, by saying that, he's saying, I know God will hear me because I know God personally.

I have a real relationship with God. And I know what kind of God he is. He's a God who hears his people. David knew that. So, the letter to Arnold Schwarzenegger that I wrote wasn't actually the only fan mail that I've written.

Much more recently, I wrote a series of letters to a person in America who I followed very closely and of whom I'm still one of the biggest fans because now I'm married to her. Writing letters to my girlfriend, who is now my wife, was a very different experience to writing letters to Arnold Schwarzenegger because I had a real relationship with her.

[ 11 : 13 ] You see? You see the difference. And so, because I had a real active relationship with her, I expected, when I wrote a letter, I expected it to be read and to be answered, which I'm glad to say, she did answer me.

And that's more like the relationship, the kind of relationship that David has with God. It's not a distant, well, I hope that he'll hear me kind of relationship, but it's a personal, I know that he hears me when I call to him kind of relationship.

And that's why David had the confidence that he did because of the kind of relationship he had with God. That relationship he had with God could allow him to face his trouble in life.

But it also got him into trouble, which we go on to see because the thing is, David had that kind of relationship, that personal, intimate relationship with God, but the people around him didn't.

Many people around him didn't have a personal relationship with God. And so what they did is they ended up criticizing David for his relationship with God when he trusted God seemingly blindly, when God didn't seem to come through for him, he still trusted God, and he got criticized for it.

[ 12 : 26 ] And we see that in verse two, where he now turns to address these people who are criticizing him for praying to God and trusting God when God's not coming through.

And we see the next point, I want us to see, David's rebuke in verse two. He's talking to the people. He says, How long will you people turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?

Now it's important for us when we, in order to understand what David's saying here and who he's addressing, we need to understand the situation he was actually in. We need to get a grasp on what kind of difficulty he was going through at this time.

And we don't know for sure, but most likely, from what he goes on to say, is it was some kind of national crisis, that it wasn't just him facing a difficulty. It was something public.

These other people were also involved. Probably a drought or a crop failure, in fact, from what we see later. And for the leader of an agricultural society, that was a big thing.

[ 13 : 26 ] You must understand, farming back then was the nation's bread and butter. And when farming failed, that was bad news for everyone, especially the leader. And the point is, while David turns towards God, naturally, in this crisis, other people do the opposite.

Other people turn away from God. Other people are saying, well, God's not coming through for us. God's not blessing us. Let's seek other gods. Let's go somewhere else. Let's look for our answer somewhere else. You see, they followed God when everything was going okay, but when things got bad, they dropped him.

And they searched for help somewhere else. They were fair-weather followers of God, if you like. The truth is, they were really only interested in God for what they could get out of it. And we see that in verse 6, when David is praying to God again, look what he says in verse 6.

He says, Many, Lord, are asking, who will bring us prosperity? Many in today's world are asking exactly the same question, aren't they? But you see, these people were only interested in what God could do for them.

They didn't worship God for God himself. They didn't worship God because he is worthy of worship. They worshipped God because he gave stuff to them.

[ 14 : 41 ] They worshipped him for what he gave them. And it's here that we really get to the heart of what the psalm is talking about, which is the difference between a true faith in God and what I call a transactional faith in God.

That's really what's at the heart of this psalm. And we need to understand the difference. You see, true faith in God, like David had, is based on real relationship.

David knew God personally and so he could trust God even when things weren't going well. That's true faith. True faith really only comes out in trial, only comes out in trouble. And in trial, in trouble, in crisis, David trusted God and we could see it was because of his relationship with God.

That's true faith. While on the other hand, transactional faith, like these people had, isn't a real relationship with God. It's only a superficial devotion to God which lasts only as long as I get something out of it.

That's transactional faith. But when God doesn't bless me, well then I'm not really interested in him. It's a transaction. You see, I give him and he gives me in return. And if he doesn't, well then I go somewhere else.

[ 15 : 50 ] That's transactional faith. And I think a lot of people today, even within the church, have a transactional faith in God. A devotion to God based on what I get out of it.

Isn't that true? You know, I'll put in to God based on what I get out. Because that's the way the world works. That's the way our minds work naturally. I'll only invest in this company if it's going to give me good returns, if I get something out of it.

I'll only pay these insurance premiums if I get something out of it, if I get decent cover by this insurance company. Well sadly, too many people think about God that way. They think, they think of faith in God as an insurance policy for life.

You know, I put in my weekly premiums by coming to church and God better pay out when I need him. And we're all guilty one way or another of thinking like God that way as an insurance policy.

And that's exactly how these people criticizing David viewed God. And they criticized David because he trusted God even when God didn't pay out. But you see, that was the mark of true faith in God.

[ 16 : 58 ] That's the mark of true relationship with God. When God doesn't seem to be coming through, do we still worship him? Do we still trust him? Do we still follow him? And so, because of that, David goes on to give these people a warning in verse 4.

And this is a warning we all need to hear. Listen to what he says. David's warning. Verse 4, he says, tremble and do not sin. By the way, that line is variously translated. We don't exactly know what the Hebrew said.

But it's either in your anger do not sin, be angry and do not sin, or tremble. I think that's a more likely translation. Tremble and do not sin. When you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.

Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust the Lord. And so basically, what I think David is wanting these people to see is that a transactional faith in God is not only unhelpful in your life, but it is sinful to think of God that way.

And he's warning these people. He wants them to seriously consider their own hearts in private, on their beds, and realize how sinful it actually is to consider God as some vending machine in the sky that we just get stuff from.

[ 18 : 10 ] He says, that's not only unhelpful, and not only are you missing out on relationship with God, but it is sin and you need to repent of it. You see, he wants them to realize how perverted their hearts are to think that way about God, and he wants them to realize that far more than they need God's blessings, they need forgiveness from God.

It's something that we, everybody, needs to hear over and over again. God doesn't exist to give us stuff. What we need from God is not what he can give us in terms of blessings. What we actually need is forgiveness because of our sinful hearts.

That's what David is trying to get these people to see. And that's why we're supposed to offer sacrifices in verse 5. Offer sacrifices not as a way of securing God's blessings which they thought.

They thought the transaction. Well, if I give sacrifices then God will give me something. David's saying, no. Offer sacrifices as a way of recognizing your sin and the price that needs to be paid for your sin.

That's why sacrifices were gory and bloody and they involved animals dying because the point was that when you sin the price is life. Your sin is serious and he wants these people to see that.

[ 19 : 22 ] He wants them to go and offer sacrifices again and remember how serious their sin is and that they desperately need forgiveness. See, David essentially wants them to consider the nature of their relationship with God.

And if we want to apply this psalm to our lives this morning that's exactly what we need to do as well. We need to consider our relationship with God.

I want to ask you each a question this morning. What kind of relationship do you have with God? We must ask that question of ourselves. We must, you know, silently, in private, just consider what does my relationship with God look like?

What kind of relationship do I have with God? Is it only a transactional relationship? Be honest. Do I only ever pray to God when I need something? Otherwise, I'm not really interested in Him for the rest of the time of my life.

You see, because of our sinful heart, we all tend towards that kind of relating to God. And what we all need to do on a regular basis is repent of that.

[ 20 : 27 ] Recognize when we're just seeing God is there to give us stuff and repent of that sinful attitude. Consider your own heart and consider how you'd feel if someone you dearly loved only ever came to you when they needed something.

And the rest of the time they ignored you. You see, and how much worse is it when we do that to God who gives us life and breath and every blessing we enjoy in life? How bad is it when we don't give Him the honor He deserves and we only come to Him when we want something?

Well, you see, each of us must take time to recognize when we do that and regularly, privately, like David says, repent of our transactional view of God.

And then David says in verse 5, we must offer the sacrifices of the righteous. to come back to God in real relationship. Now, in the Old Testament, as I mentioned earlier, people offered animal sacrifices when they came to terms with the sin of their hearts and they knew that there was a price for sin that needed to be paid.

And they knew they needed forgiveness. Well, God gave them this temporary measure of sacrificing animals. But you see, those sacrifices in the Old Testament were only ever there to point people to the ultimate sacrifice when he came, who is Jesus Christ.

[ 21 : 48 ] He's the ultimate sacrifice, the Son of God who died for our sin, who died for our sinful hearts and our wrong views of God and the way that we constantly turn away from God.

Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for all of that, to wipe it clean. And because of that, because Jesus came and died as the fulfillment to all those sacrifices, not only can we find forgiveness for our sinful attitudes and our sinful hearts, but through Jesus, and this is the great thing, you can start to have a real, intimate, living relationship with the Lord of the universe like David had.

You can have the same kind of relationship with God as David had. He was close to God, who was always constantly in intimate relationship with God.

You see, not a distant relationship where you hope God hears you, but an intimate relationship where you can experience God's presence every day and you know that He is with you and that He hears you and that He cares for you.

Don't you want that kind of relationship with God where He is the center of your life, where you are living the way He made you to because He is with you every day.

[ 23 : 09 ] And you are speaking to Him and walking with Him every day. It is the best way to live. There's no other way to live. Any other way is pointless. Don't you want that kind of relationship that David had with God?

Well, all you've got to do to experience that is to come to Jesus Christ, repent of your sins and accept God's Spirit to come into your life to change you.

See, that's why Jesus came to earth. I mean, yes, Jesus came to earth to wipe our sins away, which is great, but why? Why did He do that? Because God wants to experience real relationship with you.

He wants you to enjoy Him for eternity. And Jesus came to die for you and your sins so that you can experience that relationship, not just in eternity, but right now in this life.

And when you do that, when you have that kind of relationship with God, then look at the result in verse 8. In peace will I lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.

[ 24 : 12 ] You can say that too, even in the worst trouble, because you know God. You see, this psalm gives us the secret to true peace. And it's not through yoga, and it's not through a special diet, or it's not through taking an overseas holiday where you'll find peace.

No, true peace comes from having a real relationship with the God of the universe every single day, a real active living relationship. That is the relationship that Jesus died to give you.

And more than anything, as your pastor, I want you to experience that relationship every day. You know, I want to plead with you to make sure that every day you are experiencing that real living active relationship with God.

That is my greatest wish for you. You know, my job is to kind of look after your spiritual well-being and teach you the Bible, but really all it comes down to is your relationship with God.

And that's the only way I can help you, is to bring you into a real active living relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And if you're not, if you know that God is distant to you, then come to me, talk to me.

[ 25 : 26 ] I would love to help you through Jesus Christ to enter into real living relationship with God. That is by far the most important thing you could ever have in life.

Don't put it off. And when you have that relationship through Jesus and when you nurture that relationship in prayer, not just asking God for stuff, but prayer for the sake of just relating with God himself and enjoying God and meditating on God for who he is rather than for what he can give you, when you're in that kind of relationship, it's that relationship where you'll find real peace.

Even in the worst situations, you will find real peace like David did because you know God and you know his real presence and that is enough. Let's pray.

Yes, Lord, we thank you so much that you have given your son Jesus Christ to come into our world to deal with our sin that was separating us from you and to bring us into real relationship relationship.

Lord, I pray for anybody here who does not have real relationship with you. I pray for anybody here who feels distant from you.

[ 26 : 36 ] Lord, that you would let the light of your face shine on them and fill their hearts with joy of knowing you through Jesus Christ. Would you bring them into active real relationship with you and would you help us each as we go on to a new week to live every day in step with you, knowing you, speaking to you, relating with you, meditating on you, and enjoying you.

And we pray that not only will we enjoy you in this life, but in eternity as well. In Jesus Christ's name. Amen. Amen.