

Psalm 55 (1984 NIV)
Praying in Times of Fear and Anger

Introduction

This news was once reported in the local social media.

Slightly over a quarter of Singapore residents aged 18 to 29 suffered from poor mental health last year, a national survey has found.

This group of youth made up the highest proportion of residents who faced mental health issues compared to other age groups, the Ministry of Health (MOH) said on releasing its findings from the 2022 National Population Health Survey on Wednesday (Sept 27).

The proportion of young people dealing with mental health issues in 2022 — 25.3 per cent — was an increase from the 21.5 per cent in 2020.

In comparison, the prevalence of poor mental health in those aged 30 to 39 was 19.4 per cent last year, a rise from 12.6 per cent in 2020.

For those aged 40 to 49, the proportion was 15.7 per cent, up from 12.4 per cent in 2020.

Overall, 17 per cent of Singapore residents faced mental health issues last year, up from 13.4 per cent in 2020.

However, more people were also willing to seek informal help — such as from friends, relatives or religious leaders — when they were unable to cope with stress, the study found.

MOH's survey tracked the health and risk factors, as well as lifestyle practices of Singapore residents aged 18 to 74 between July 2021 to June 2022.

As part of the study, about 8,000 residents completed household interviews and around 9,000 attended a health examination.

(<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/highest-proportion-among-youths-aged-18-29-poor-mental-health-rising-over-25-national-health-survey-2267191>)

All of us, young and old, are not spared from mental distress in life. Indeed, in the daily grind of life, we all have to face distress time to time. What distress is troubling you today?

And if being a Christian does not spare us from distress, how different are we from a non-believer? The difference is not that our faith makes us insensitive or

immune to distress. Rather, the difference is that in times of distress, we have a resource that a non-believer doesn't have—that resource is honest prayer before a listening God.

In Psa. 55, we see how this resource is being employed by David. It was during a time of great insecurity in his life.

- His enemies were trying to track him down.
- Someone he loved as a close friend had betrayed him.

Was David having in view his running away from the jealous hatred of King Saul, or from his rebellious son Absalom? We have no way to know for sure, but anyhow, this psalm of personal lament was written at a time of David's great distress.

But the main point in this psalm is not to shock us that even David, the man after God's own heart, can be so distressed. The main point here is to teach us that as Christians, we have the powerful resource of honest prayer before a listening God.

Now, why is honest prayer before a listening God a powerful resource for us? The answer is that it is a powerful resource because it can first work in us even before it works in our situation. Two ways it can first work in us, and the first is ...

I. Honest prayer before a listening God can drive out our fear.

In this psalm, we see David going through a whole gamut of human emotions—fear, anxiety, sorrow, and anger. He seems like a man caught in a messy web of inner confusion. This is typical of someone who is experiencing extreme distress. David here is not a man who is reflecting on his distress after the trouble is over. Rather, he is here in the midst of struggling with his troubled emotions in his distress. Indeed, this psalm can also make a difference in us when we too are similarly troubled. We see in this psalm how prayer did make a difference in David when he was mentally stressed and emotionally troubled; how by praying to God, David was first changed even while his situation remained the same.

In his cry to God, we see David expressing his great fear in vv. 2b-5.

2b ... My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught
 3 at the voice of the enemy, at the stares of the wicked; for they bring down suffering upon me and revile me in their anger.
 4 My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me.
 5 Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.

Note David's fear in v.3—"... the voice of the enemy, at the stares of the wicked ..." It seems that David's fear has made him paranoid—everywhere he goes, he seems to hear hostile voices and sense evil stares. No wonder David swings into a mood of anguish, fear, and despair in vv. 4-5—"My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me."

Yes, David here is as human as you and I. When he cannot handle the pressure of his distress anymore, he does a very human thing—he desires to run away; to escape from the problem.

Verses 6-8 read:

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

Isn't this still very true for many people today? They can be very good escapists when they try to run away from their own distress in life.

- They can turn to alcohol.
- They can turn to drugs.
- They can turn to isolating themselves from society.
- They can turn to immersing themselves in work.
- They can even turn to denial mode—i.e. pretending the problem is not there and so doing nothing about it.

All these are attempts to numb themselves into some kind of amnesia. And the most extreme form of these is to end it all by taking one's own life. Indeed, the cry of David here is also the cry of many in our world today—"I can't take it anymore. I want to get away from it all. I want to end it all."

David, a man of great faith and courage, was tempted to run away from it all at one of his most difficult times in life. This is a very human response. What distress are you facing today? Do you feel like running away from it all? If you are entertaining such feelings or thoughts, do not condemn yourself as less than human. It is very human to feel this way. Not even David was immune from such feelings or thoughts.

Now, the folly here is to think that we can get away from it all by simply running away from the situation without dealing with our inner feelings. These unresolved feelings will resurface themselves someday and haunt us again in another situation. You see, our feelings are part of us, and we cannot run away from our feelings, good or bad. Rather, we need to first face them and deal with their damaging impact in our lives.

When we try to put a wall between ourselves and our feelings, we are trying to divide up our inner being. This can generate much emotional and psychological problems. When we don't face up to our true feelings, we often end up feeling depressed physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

In his fear, David expresses his wish to fly away from his situation of distress; he wishes that he is a dove in v. 6—"Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away ..." But then, he realises that he is not a dove but a man in reality. He can't fly away from it all like a dove. So, he has to face it all like a man.

How then does David choose to face it all like a man? He turns to God; he prays to his God who hears and listens to him in vv. 1-2, 16-17.

1 Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea; 2 hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught ...

16 But I call to God, and the Lord saves me. 17 Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice.

David turns to God in prayer to verbalise his frustration before the Almighty. At a time like this, prayer is David's powerful resource ... and ours as well. When there seems no one we can trust; when we seem to be all alone; when there seems no sympathetic ear to turn to, there is God! And there is this powerful resource of prayer to communicate with God who hears and listens to our cries of distress.

So, don't feel condemned when you are troubled emotionally or distressed. Rather, in such times, know that you can pray openly and honestly to God who hears and listens to you. Yes, prayer is God's powerful resource to His people, i.e. you and I.

Now, prayer may seem irrelevant to a non-religious person. But to us as Christians, it can make all the difference in times of distress. This is because prayer allows us to bare our deepest feelings before our God and call for His hearing. We may feel uneasy to burden another person with our negative feelings and problems in life. After all, this person may have his/her own burdens too. But before God, we are in fact giving Him the greatest honour when we trust Him enough to bare our soul and cast our burden upon Him. God may not always promise instant deliverance, but He certainly promises sustenance by His grace, love, and mercy as we go through our difficulties in life.

Thus, we can tell God honestly our struggles in prayer. And this act of so expressing ourselves is not a running away, but really a spiritual advance. This is because we have consciously and intentionally asked God to journey with us in our situation; we have humbly acknowledged that there are some things we cannot handle on our own, and we need God.

As we come humbly and honestly before God in prayer, He also wants us to demonstrate sincerity and patience. David says in v. 17—“Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice.” This does not mean God will not or cannot take away David’s burden such that he has to keep crying out seemingly in vain to God the whole day. Nor does it mean we must have a legalistic formula in prayer before God will answer us; e.g. we must pray three times a day—morning, noon, and evening—and no less. Rather, it means that God wants us to be sincere and patient before Him as we pray and prepare ourselves to hear Him and to rest in Him.

However, it is also possible that God may not want some of our burdens to be relieved. God knows that these burdens can keep us humble, empathetic, and balanced in life. In other words, God wants these burdens to nurture the trait of endurance in us; to make us strong in Him while we are weak in ourselves; to hold us up in Him while we are down in ourselves. And as we wait, trust, and rest in God, He will grow our strength equal to, and even more than equal to, the weight of any burden that we may have to carry in life.

So, if you are wanting to run away from it all, David’s psalm here teaches us to pray before God concerning our honest feelings. In doing so, we are not running away from our feelings, but making a spiritual advance by allowing God into our situation. This is the powerful resource of prayer that we can enjoy as God’s people.

Eduardo Sierra, 35, of Spain once went into a church to pray while he was on a trip to Stockholm, Sweden. The church was empty except for a coffin. He prayed for the dead man for 20 minutes.

He then signed the condolence book after he saw a note asking those who prayed for the dead man to enter their names and addresses. He was the first to sign.

A few weeks later, he was told he had inherited the fortune of the dead man, Jens Svenson, 73. In his will, Svenson had said, “Whoever prays for my soul gets all my belongings.”

(“The New Paper”, 4 Oct. 1996)

Now, I am sharing this story NOT to tell you that when you pray, you will receive such earthly, material reward. Indeed, the reward to prayer promised in Psalm 55 is NOT of such kind.

Rather, the reward that comes with praying before God who listens to us has to do with ...

- Being honest before God with our feelings yet without feeling condemned.
- Being sustained by God's grace, love, and mercy as we go through trials in life.
- Having our fear changed to faith by God's transforming grace.

Honest prayer before a listening God is our powerful resource in times of distress. Yes, honest prayer before our listening God can drive out our fear so that we can press on in faith. Honest prayer before a listening God is a powerful resource because it can first work in us even before it works in our situation.

Let's now consider a second way honest prayer before a listening God can first work in us, and it is ...

II. Honest prayer before a listening God can diminish our anger.

David says in vv. 9-15, 20-21:

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

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.

In vv. 12-14 and 20-21, it is evident that David is angry with a close companion who has betrayed him. We cannot be sure who this person is, but we are sure that David is truly angry with this close companion. In fact, he is angry enough to pray against this person and his accomplices this way in v. 15—"Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the grave, for evil finds lodging among them." In today's language, David is praying something like this—"Lord, send my enemies all to hell!"

Do you have problem praying and hearing this kind of prayer? I do ... but honestly, maybe not all the time? Why then does David pray this way? I believe we can answer this in two ways.

- First, David is here expressing privately to God how he feels in the light of being injured and betrayed by someone he has once trusted. David is

here trying to be honest before God as he deals with his own anger in life.

- Second, David has been walking close to the Lord, and he knows that such people are not merely his enemies, but also God's enemies. These people have actually sinned against God, and David is angry with them as such. Also, David's praying is only asking God to do what is consistent with His judgement upon the wicked throughout biblical history.
 - E.g. "confuse the wicked ... confound their speech" in v. 9 reminds us of God sending confusion to the people when they tried to rebel against God by building the Tower of Babel in Gen. 11.
 - "Let them go down alive to the grave" in v. 15 reminds us of how God allowed the people to be swallowed up by the earth when they rebelled against Moses in Num. 16.

Thus, David is here not so much calling for personal vengeance, but for God to vindicate Himself (i.e. God) and him (i.e. David) as the Lord has always done so in biblical history in the face of wickedness.

However, the important thing to note here is that as David deals with his own anger before God in prayer, he does not remain angry and vindictive in spirit. He says in vv. 22-23:

22 Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall. 23 But 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.

David now rests his case with God. Indeed, judgement rests with God for He says, "Vengeance is mine!" In his fear, David could have chosen to run away from it all in his weakness. In his anger, David could have chosen to fight his enemies to the bloody end in his own strength.

But as he prays honestly before God about his distress, his fear turns into faith; his anger turns into anticipation of God's vindication. So, he now casts his cares on the Lord and rests in Him. He places his life as well as his enemies in God's hands; no need for him to fight or flee. God will fight for him. Indeed, Jesus who was betrayed by a close companion (Judas) also refused to fight or flee. Rather, Jesus chose to rest Himself in the Father's hands and in submission to the Father's will. In so doing, Jesus defeated the enmity and evil of sin and death.

Are you feeling angry, or betrayed, or injured, or mistreated today? Perhaps, you are thinking of fighting back to the bloody end, or fleeing to the safest refuge.

It is said that when Leonardo da Vinci was painting "The Last Supper", he painted Judas by using the face of a man he somehow hated much. After having painted the face of Judas, the famous painter shared that he was unable to paint Jesus' face because of his inner feeling of

bitterness towards the face of Judas. But once he had removed the face of Judas, he was able to paint Jesus' face because the bitterness was no more in him. And when he finally painted again the face of Judas, it was simply a face he conceived after his inner bitterness had disappeared.¹

Psalm 55 teaches us to neither flee in fear nor fight in anger/bitterness as we live and work for the Lord here on earth. Instead, we are to come to God in honest prayer and share our deepest feelings with Him—both our fear and anger. This open door to come in honest prayer before our listening God is our powerful resource. And it helps us to draw on the strength of God that will drive out our fear and deliver us from our anger. And in place of these, this powerful resource can grant us a deep sense of quiet faith and peaceful calm in God.

Conclusion

God is not going to force us to cast our cares and concerns upon Him. We can go on choosing to depend on our own strength and human resources. But what makes us, the people of God, different from the others is that we can come in honest prayer to God who hears and listens to us in our times of fear and anger.

Now, you and I cannot readily come to someone who is a total stranger to us; one whom we hardly trust and say, "I want to bare my soul to you in honest confession." Agree? It is the same in our relationship with God—God desires that we cultivate an intimate relationship with Him so that we are readily come to Him in honest prayer. Of course, we cannot cultivate this intimacy with God overnight but over time, like in any other relationship.

So, let me close with this soul-searching question—"When was the last time you pray to God intimately and honestly about your deepest feelings—e.g. your fear and anger?"

Perhaps, it is now time for you to begin if you have yet to start, or to resume if you have stopped—i.e. to draw on this powerful resource of honest prayer before a God who will not fail to hear and listen to the deepest cries of His people.

Amen!

¹ <https://tobincrenshaw.medium.com/the-man-leonardo-da-vinci-couldnt-forgive-78402705092a>