

# **Cries Of The Heart - In Suffering**

PSALM 40

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We've all seen the headlines, and perhaps heard some of the interviews in the aftermath of the terrible tsunami tragedy that struck southeast Asia on Boxing Day.

"Where Is God?" asked reporters?

And as they did, images of devastation and terrible suffering filled the screen.

In the dark of these Sunday Lenten evening services, I'd like to take some time with you to pause and meditate on that very real, very powerful question, a question that cries straight from the human heart.

It comes as we consider suffering, tragedy and sickness.

It comes as we reflect on our own misfortune, our fallen state of living.

It comes when we rage about the injustice and brutality in so much of the World.

It comes as we consider the wandering, the prodigal nature of so many people.

*Why, God?*

*Why must it be so?*

*Why do you let it occur?*

*Why do you not stop it short?*

*What, God - what possible good can come from this?*

*How long, God - how long before we come to a new day, bright and free of suffering?*

These realities of the human condition are reflected in what is, by far,

the most popular book of the Bible,

the book that comes straight from the human heart

the book of songs from the heart

joyful songs

celebration songs....

...and songs of suffering

songs of uncertainty, songs of rage.

As I visit in living rooms while we wait for the undertakers to arrive,

as we huddle, uncertainly, in an ICU waiting room

as we linger, quietly, in a coffee shop

as we sit, frustrated, in the lobby of a court room

the book at the top of the all-time request list is *Psalms*.

In the next weeks we will go to that book to consider cries of the human heart.

This week the cries of suffering.

Next week the cries of a sinner.

Then the cries of injustice.  
And finally, the cries of the wandering.

Lenten cries of the heart. Tonight - the cries of the suffering.  
And to frame our conversation we use words from Psalm 40.  
It's a prayer for help. By David.  
The first verses of the psalm are a testimony of God's ability to save.  
It speaks of God's deliverance.  
It calls all to trust in Him.

But,  
then,  
in v.11 there is a call - *do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me....  
For evils have encompassed me without number...*

And in v.17:  
*As for me, I am poor and needy....  
You are my help and my deliverer;  
Do not delay, O my God.*

The psalmist will sing - a song  
new song  
of the new,  
the fresh saving work that God is doing.

Sometimes, though,  
believers can't see that work.  
They're left to wonder -  
*Lord, I'd love to sing that song?  
But when will I see that work of yours?  
How long...  
...how long before we'll be able to sing that new song?*

*How long, O Lord,  
How long?*

And there is a cry that comes,  
over and over again,  
in scripture.

*How long?*

The Irish band U2 worked with that theme in its rendition of Psalm 40:1-3.  
From their album entitled *War* we'll allow them to present God's Word to us tonight.

Watch.  
And listen.

**40**

*I waited patiently for the Lord  
He inclined and heard my cry  
He brought me up out of the pit  
Out of the miry clay*

*I will sing, sing a new song  
I will sing, sing a new song*

*How long to sing this song  
How long to sing this song  
How long...how long...how long...  
How long...to sing this song*

*He set my feet upon a rock  
And made my footsteps firm  
Many will see  
Many will see and fear*

*I will sing, sing a new song  
I will sing, sing a new song*

*I will sing, sing a new song  
I will sing, sing a new song*

*How long to sing this song  
How long to sing this song  
How long...how long...how long...  
How long...to sing this song* [U2 "40"]

**Reader:**

*God of life, God of comfort:  
alone,  
afraid,  
in fear,  
in loss,*

*we cry out: "Why, O Lord, why?"  
"How long, O Lord, how long?"*

*We cling to you in hope  
even as we grasp for hope.  
So grasp us in your loving embrace  
through Jesus Christ,  
who endured the cross for our sake.*

*Amen.* [from *The Worship Sourcebook*]

So –

what **DO** we make of the suffering, the sickness, the disability that we see all around us;  
that we see and that we experience personally?

Understand one thing right from the beginning.

If you're hoping I'll present a tight, philosophically correct explanation for pain's presence in the world, you will be disappointed.

I won't.

And I cannot.

I cannot because the Bible doesn't present it to us.

What we gain from Scripture is, rather, a practical overview of the problem that suffering brings, and some real advice for daily living in the middle of that suffering.

Living in the face of suffering which had its birth in the third chapter of Genesis - way back when our first human parents willingly ushered evil into creation. They gave it a toe hold. And like a field mouse wanting into your house in Fall - a little crack was all that evil needed. It wriggled in and gained a huge hold.

Thorns.

Thistles.

Sweat of the brow.

Pain in childbirth.

All these are named in the curse that falls on Creation.

The curse and the darkness that has been with us ever since.

It is a problem, that cursed darkness is.

A **BIG** problem.

It is **THE** big problem in the Bible's great narrative.

And it is the problem that God promises to tackle and overcome with the protogospel promise given to Eve that her seed will crush the head of the serpent's seed.

Darkness and pain

will

one day

be destroyed.

Victory is predicted in the garden.

But from the prediction to the consummation of victory is a long road.

The next stage on the road is the Epiphany of Jesus Christ with ministry as a human being - the Son of God and Son of Man.

That is Victory Begun.

As Christians we believe that victory is Achieved on the cross.

There death seeks to crush and destroy Jesus.

But cannot.

He willingly takes the creational curse on himself.

He sets us free from the shackles of that curse on the cross.

It is finished.

The curse is lifted from us and placed on Jesus.

Victory is Achieved.

That victory is confirmed in the Resurrection.

For there evil death seeks to hold Jesus prisoner forever.

But He breaks free.

He shatters death's grip.

He retains hold of the last word.

Victory is EXTENDED through the ministry of the Church in history.

We spread the Word about the cross.

We spread the word that the curse is not final.

Evil does NOT have the last word.

We do that at work.

We do that in our homes.

You will have a chance to spread that word in a few weeks as we flyer the neighbourhood just before Easter.

Victory, however,  
is not yet CONSUMATED.

It is the conundrum of already.... and not yet.  
Already the devil has been defeated.  
Not yet has he conceded defeat.  
Already the devil has been overthrown.  
Not yet has he been eliminated.  
In fact - he still wields great power.

That is where we live - in the *already but not yet* time of tension.  
It is the time when we need to be very real, very aware, and very sensitive to the presence of suffering, sickness, poverty and pain.

I get so frustrated with the cheap triumphalism or name 'n claim religion that passes for authentic Christianity. It's such a cheap North American cop out. To even suggest that there can be living on this side of Christ's return which is free of pain or sickness or an encounter with death is sheer folly. It is to deny the very reality of where we stand on the continuum of Christ's journey of Salvation – the Creation/ Fall/ Redemption/ Consummation journey. It is to deny the core message of the book of *Revelation* – namely that Christ **HAS** defeated Satan and one day **WILL** destroy him.

It just hasn't happened yet.  
Leaving us to join all humanity in crying  
How long?  
How long before we will sing the new song to the Lamb without blemish - the song of the triumphal saints before the Throne in Heaven, as *Revelation* reveals it.  
How long?

We cry.  
But, brothers and sisters,  
we cry **NOT** as people without hope.  
we cry **NOT** as people uncertain of the future world order.

We cry as people ***under the cross***.  
The cross of victory.

So often in Lent we tend to look at the cross and see in our mind a courtroom scene - a legal sentence is passed, and Christ substitutes himself for us as the guilty party.

Gustav Aulen, a Swedish theologian writing after World War I, suggests that we should consider imagining, instead, a battle scene. Imagine the great battle between

heaven and hell, between Christ and the devil, as you see the cross.

And remember as your mind is seeing,  
remember that **Christ is victor**.

Remember that as you scan the papers and read about fire consuming a home and a family's possessions. Or how medicine has yet to find a solid answer to the problem of treating depression. Or the tremendous work yet to be done in the wake of the tsunami. Or as you read the report the doctor hands you.

Yes, we cry as we read these.

And sometimes we just want to run and hide.

But then,

as we peek out from under cover,  
peek up at the cross.

Peek up and remember Him who came to experience all that we experience;  
to suffer all that we suffer;  
including pain, loneliness, and death.

Remember Him who came to tackle that evil intruder into creation;  
to tackle and defeat Him.

Remember Him who came off that cross and rose to everlasting life  
so that we may have that life with Him.

Remember that the pain you now experience is **NOT** the end of your story.

While it is very big

And while it lasts so very, very long right now

There is a bigger, even longer lasting reality awaiting you.

The reality opened to us by Christ on the cross -

The reality of a new heaven and a new earth - one day.

And remember that the pain you now experience is understood and even shared with you by the One who was on that cross;  
who promises never to leave or forsake us.

And remember this -

that while we don't have a good philosophical explanation for why God doesn't simply wave His divine hand and bring that whole battle to a close right now

why Jesus doesn't return as we sing the next hymn

we remember that the pain

the sickness

the thin bank account

the empty chair  
these things cannot crush us.

Remember that the One who holds the last word has a track record of taking what evil meant for harm and,  
as Joseph pointed out to his brothers who had tried to kill him,  
manages to turn the tables and use it for good.

Jesus picks up the shards that have fallen on the ground and reassembles a new collage in our lives.

Sometimes using the pain to mature and strengthen us.  
Sometimes teaching us.  
Sometimes building our patience.  
Sometimes preparing us to walk beside others who suffer.  
And sometimes -  
- well, sometimes we're not able to see what he's doing.

We're left to simply carry on in trust, faith and hope.

Hanging on to the words of other believers who have come through seasons of struggle and can give testimony to God's care *in spite* of what seems to the contrary.

Margaret Clarkson is a Canadian hymn writer born, as she tells it, into a loveless and unhappy home. From childhood she experienced debilitating headaches and crippling arthritis. She travelled the whole gamut of emotions - rage, frustration, despair, thoughts of suicide. But, she says, eventually she began to see God at work as an alchemist in her life.

The only authentic alchemist in history - able to turn base metals into gold. He succeeds in the alchemy of turning evil into good.

Here are the words of one of her hymns:

*O father, you are sovereign,  
The Lord of earthly pain,  
Transmuting earthly sorrows  
to gold of heavenly gain.  
All evil overruling,  
As none but Conqueror could,  
Your love pursues its purpose -  
Our soul's eternal good.*

Who is that alchemist?

The One who was not lounging in some deck chair beside a heavenly pool,  
But strung up on a cross.

Earthly pain - our pain - becoming His pain.

So that  
Heavenly gain - His gain - could become our gain.

Oh yes,  
the question is real -  
*Where is God?*

The answer is found there - in the cross.