

PSALM 61 verses 1-8

Hear my cry, O God;

listen to my prayer.

2 From the ends of the earth I call to you,

I call as my heart grows faint;

lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

3 For you have been my refuge,

a strong tower against the foe.

4 I long to dwell in your tent forever

and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.

5 For you, God, have heard my vows;

you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.

6 Increase the days of the king's life,

his years for many generations.

7 May he be enthroned in God's presence forever;

appoint your love and faithfulness to protect him.

8 Then I will ever sing in praise of your name

and fulfil my vows day after day.

MEDITATION

The Book of Psalms covers a wide range of material. It contains different types of poems and songs. Of course, it was the hymn book of the Jewish Church and later the hymn book of the early Christian Church. That might lead you to think that most of the psalms are concerned with expressing praise and thanksgiving to God. Certainly, a lot of them are to do with praise, but there are other kinds as well. There are penitential psalms where the writer is conscious of wrongdoing and seeks the forgiveness of God. There are psalms of faith where the author expresses his confidence and trust in God. There are others which do the opposite and allow the psalmist to call God into question for allowing the wicked to flourish. There are others again which cry for help, as the speaker grapples with a personal difficulty.

That is what we have in Psalm 61. It is a cry for help in the midst of distress. The psalmist gives the picture of a man journeying along an exhausting road. What he needs is a great rock in whose shadow he can shelter either from the violence of the tempest or from the heat of the day. With our climate in Scotland it is not often that we would want a rock to shelter us from the heat of the mid-day sun, but we do know plenty about gale force winds and heavy rain from which we would want protection. Having set up this image, the psalmist prays that God will protect him from the storms of life. He wants God to be the rock of shelter which he needs, as life proves to be a difficult way for him.

We all experience storms in our lives. It may be extreme pain which is difficult to bear. It could be serious illness which we fear may be life-threatening. It might be a difficult relationship within the family or with neighbours or with colleagues at work. It could be financial problems. It could be any number of awkward situations. But, like the psalmist, we cry for help and look to God to be the rock which provides us with shelter.

We turn back to the psalm and see that the writer takes time to remember the past. In verse 3 he tells us how long before this he has experienced the help and strength which God can give. He is not praying to a God who is untried. Likewise for us, our past experience of God can give us confidence as we face a present difficulty. We sometimes refer to the old hymn, "Count your blessings: name them one by one." If we take time to name our blessings, we will realise that they include God's help when we have encountered problems in the past. We did not have to face them alone because God was there to shelter us, strengthen us and guide us. It is that knowledge from the past which reassures us for the present.

In verses 4 to 8, the psalmist thinks of the future. Once again, he pledges himself to be faithful to God, to serve him and to fulfil his vows. The same should apply for us. If we receive the help we need in present difficulties, we should express our gratitude in greater service in the future.

So, this psalm really deals with all three aspects of time, past, present and future. Trouble exists in the present; but the psalmist gains his confidence from his past experience of God; and for the future he pledges himself to God. That sounds like a suitable pattern for our own lives!

PRAYER

O God, our Father, we give you praise and thanks that you have been our refuge and our rock in times past. We are grateful that you have brought us safely through many difficult and trying experiences. Enable us to take heart and draw confidence from what you have done for us in days gone-by. Help us therefore to place our trust in you for help and strength both now and in the future.

Forgive us, heavenly Father, that we are not strong enough to embrace hardship by ourselves. Forgive us that we are too easily defeated when things go wrong. Forgive us that we feel inadequate when we are faced with misunderstanding or ridicule from other people. Give us vision to discover your will and courage to fulfil it.

May we find in your presence all that we require for our daily lives. When the future seems uncertain, when we face any kind of suffering, when we are tempted to fear, by your grace give us the courage we need to soldier on. When we encounter trouble, when we experience pain and sickness, when our plans fail, when we are tempted to self-pity, by your grace give us all the strength to persevere. Enable us to have sure faith in the final victory of Jesus Christ our Lord.

We acknowledge, O God, that other people need your help as well. We ask you in your mercy to supply the basic needs of every man, woman and child. Grant that every person in every country may have enough food to eat. Grant that medical skill and adequate nursing may be within the reach of all who have problems with their health. Grant that no one in need of justice may be denied their fundamental human rights. Grant peace the world over so that all people may have the opportunity to live without war or the threat of war.

Above all, may your kingdom come on earth; may your purpose be revealed throughout the world; and may the reality of your presence be experienced everywhere.

Eternal God, we give you high praise and hearty thanks for all your faithful people throughout the ages. We are especially grateful for those who have faced hardship and come through it victoriously, those who have embarked on the Christian pilgrimage and endured to the end. Grant that we may be inspired by their example and arrive at last in the heavenly city.

We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.