

How may we pray when life has run us ragged? At one such time, Pamela Evans set aside politeness and propriety and, through the earthy honesty of the psalms, discovered a renewed intimacy with God.

## come back, God...

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. They say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.'  
Psalm 91:1-2 (TNIV)

Relent, Lord! How long will it be?  
Have compassion on your servants.  
Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,  
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.  
Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,  
for as many years as we have seen trouble.  
May your deeds be shown to your servants,  
your splendour to their children.  
May the favour of the Lord our God rest on us;  
establish the work of our hands for us –  
yes, establish the work of our hands.

Psalm 90:13-17 (TNIV)

Not long ago, there was a period of several months during which it felt as if every day brought bad news. Family and close friends were struggling with ill health, extreme pressures at work, and unpleasant choices; my favourite aunt had died in difficult circumstances shortly before my father had come within a whisker of doing the same; those whose job was to help us seemed to be creating as many problems as they were solving. I was exhausted physically, wilting emotionally, and developing an aversion to phone calls. Then, after a restless night, I discovered that Psalm 91 was the reading set for the day:

I've used this psalm many times to express trust in God during a bumpy patch, welcoming the reassurance it brings, the picture of my secure place

under his covering. Maybe you also have favourite psalms, which give voice to your praises in times of celebration and your groans when nothing seems to be going right?

On that particular day, however, instead of finding Psalm 91 comforting, I found it hard to stomach. Yes, at one level I could agree that the familiar words were true. But on this occasion I felt unable to read that psalm prayerfully with any sense of integrity. God knew perfectly well how I was feeling that morning: there were things I needed to express to him if we were to have something approaching a meaningful dialogue, and they weren't in that psalm. Providentially, my husband noticed the end of Psalm 90:

Come back, God – how long do we have to wait? – and treat your servants with



Pamela Evans is a retired doctor with experience in counselling and spiritual direction. Her third book, *Shaping the Heart: reflections on spiritual formation and fruitfulness*, was published by the Bible Reading Fellowship in October 2011. Details of all Pamela's books may be found at [www.pamelaevans.org.uk](http://www.pamelaevans.org.uk).



### For reflection and action

- You could work on a plan to become more familiar with the psalms as a resource for life and ministry, reading one, two or more per day, according to their length and the time available. Try reading them out loud, to yourself and to God, your vocal expression matching the content. (Resist the temptation mentally to award yourself marks; this is not a performance.) If possible, use a version such as *The Message* that will facilitate the involvement of your heart as well as your head. See what happens. Note down anything that seems important.

- If you struggle with expressing emotion, practise with God by using words from the Psalms. More generally, remember to tell him not just what you think, or what you'd like him to do, but also how you're feeling. Our feelings cannot be relied upon to tell us 'the whole truth and nothing but the truth', but that doesn't mean they're best ignored – far from it! Allowing feelings to dictate the course of our lives is daft but, while they make poor managers, they often make useful messengers. Sometimes I've reflected on confusing troublesome emotions before God and found him directing me to the root cause in no time at all. A speedy answer isn't guaranteed but, in my experience, it's a lot quicker when I ask than when I don't!

- If you'd like to explore this subject further, including the pastoral use of psalms as a way of helping an individual or a church community to express their grief, pain or disappointment to God, see Grove Booklet W193, *Sowing in Tears: How to lament in a church of praise* by Paul Bradbury. This includes a list of psalms suitable for use in intercession or as a framework for a service, and references to many other resources.

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kindness for a change. Surprise us with love at daybreak; then we'll skip and dance all the day long.

Make up for the bad times with some good times; we've seen enough evil to last a lifetime.

Let your servants see what you're best at – the ways you rule and bless your children. And let the loveliness of our Lord, our God, rest on us, confirming the work that we do. Oh, yes. Affirm the work that we do! (Psalm 90:13-17, *The Message*)

This psalm, subtitled the 'prayer of Moses, man of God', allowed me to pray honestly, in a way that conveyed my level of distress. It put words around my feeling that the Almighty God in whom I trusted could (should!) have been doing more to help. Yes, I was ready to be surprised by a good day – so how about it, God?

Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, often used to recommend the Psalms when those whom he pastored admitted to finding it hard to pray. Many of them subsequently expressed surprise at what they found there. However, the genteel English of the translations then in common use failed to capture the rough earthiness of the original; the cultured language down-played the raw emotion, and removed the sense of honest, heartfelt

communication with God. So Peterson began paraphrasing the Psalms for his congregation and the rest, as they say, is history.

The writer John Eldredge recalls a young woman who came to see him for counselling in a state of suicidal desperation. They had been meeting for many weeks when, in a session he found deeply moving, she spoke honestly about her feelings and longings. At the end of this session, he suggested turning to prayer. He could hardly believe what he was hearing as her voice 'assumed a bland, religious tone', which reflected nothing of her desperation or her pain. 'I found myself speechless. You've got to be kidding, I thought' (*Desire: the journey we must take to find the life God offers*, Thomas Nelson, 2007).

During that overwhelming time, praying scripture, especially from the Psalms, helped me to be real with myself without becoming self-focused and spiralling into self-pity. What's more, passages from scripture expressing anguish for which I could find no words also served to direct the eyes of my heart up and out towards God. Even my sense that he could have been 'doing more' became an acknowledgment of my past experience of his power; it was held within a framework of trust in a covenant-keeping almighty God. Expressing my outpourings

in 'God-breathed' words (2 Timothy 3:16), I was able both to hold forth in vigorous, urgent, heartfelt language about how hard it was and to feel safe while doing so.

The Psalms leave us in no doubt that telling God how we feel is meant to be a normal part of our relationship with him. And I can't imagine Moses speaking out Psalm 90, or David voicing Psalm 59 ('I did nothing to deserve this, God') in a 'bland, religious tone'! In fact, I'm not sure that I can think of a psalm for which this sort of tone is appropriate, although I've certainly heard plenty of them read or sung in that way!



- The Message Eugene Peterson's translation is available online at [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)
- Listen to Keith Mobberley on spiritual direction on a recent CPAS leadership podcast.