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Women of Witness

TIPS TO BETTER YOURSELF

Faith Is Forged in Crisis

By Jon Bloom

The Bible is a blood-earnest book. It's a book about reality. And reality, as we know all too well, is often brutal and bloody. The Bible doesn't sugarcoat this fact at all, but describes reality with disturbing forthrightness. Much of Scripture was written during brutal, bloody times by embattled, distressed, weary, even depressed authors. And at the pinnacle of the Bible's story, at the core of the Bible's message, is the Son of God dying a bloody death on a brutal Roman cross.

So, when we open our Bibles, rarely are we going to find a little light reading. Even in the book of Psalms, this collection of inspired spiritual poetry that has brought immeasurable comfort to an incalculable number of saints across the centuries, we are frequently faced with distressing themes. In numerous psalms, we read writers' wrestlings over what it means to trust the God they treasure as they witness some brutal and bloody reality, a reality that challenges their understanding or expectations of God's promises and purposes. These psalms fit into a category we call *psalms of lament*. In certain lament psalms, like Psalm 10, we're reading an inspired author's faith crisis captured in verse.

Can We Say That to God? We see this immediately in the opening verse:

Why, O Lord, do you stand far away?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Psalm 10:1)

That's a remarkable thing to say to God. Could a Christian Hedonist actually pray this way? Why would I ask that question that way? We at Desiring God believe that the Bible teaches an approach to life we call *Christian Hedonism*. We see in Scripture that a Christian is not someone who assents merely intellectually to core Christian propositional truth claims. A Christian loves God with all his heart (Matthew 22:37), values God as his greatest treasure (Matthew 13:44–46; Philippians 3:7–8; Hebrews 11:24–26), and seeks God as the source of his greatest and longest-lasting pleasure (Psalm 16:11). The triune God of the Bible is to be a Christian's "exceeding joy" (Psalm 43:4). Summarized in a sentence, Christian Hedonists believe Scripture teaches that *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*.

We can certainly find lots of Christian Hedonistic prayers in the Psalms, like Psalm 73:25–26,

Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

But what about Psalm 10, where the writer laments his agonizing bewilderment over unjust, greedy, violent acts against innocent, helpless people? He's not only disturbed by the wicked acts he's witnessed; he's disturbed that the wicked are prospering from their wickedness. And God, the righteous Judge, appears to be letting it happen. So, in typical biblical candor, he asks God, "Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" If a person truly loves, trusts, and treasures God above all else, can he pray like that? Can someone who rejoices in God ever lament God's apparent distance and disregard?

In short, yes. In fact, Christian Hedonists pray to God this way at certain times *because* he is our "exceeding joy," *because* we treasure him, *because* we love him. And because sometimes God's ways and timing are agonizingly difficult to grasp. We see this sorrowful-yet-rejoicing dynamic in the brutal realities of Psalm 10.

Why Did God Feel Far? First, we need to understand what was troubling this psalmist. He pours out his distress:

- *"In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor [because he is] greedy for gain" (Psalm 10:2–3).*
- He *"curses and renounces the Lord"* (even denies God's existence) (Psalm 10:3–4).
- *"His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression" (Psalm 10:7).*
- *"In hiding places he murders the innocent" (Psalm 10:8).*
- *"He seizes the poor when he draws him into his net" (Psalm 10:9).*

The poor are being exploited and even slaughtered by someone in a position of power (perhaps more than one) for the sake of financial benefit. The victims are in a "helpless" or defenseless position and so "are crushed, sink down, and fall by [the wicked person's] might" (Psalm 10:10). These would be unspeakable deeds, except that silence would only compound the injustice of it all. Therefore, like Jeremiah, the psalmist "cannot keep silent" (Jeremiah 4:19).

What Faith Sounds Like in Crisis. The psalmist strives to put the wickedness he sees into words. We can sense his righteous anger. Such horrible oppression and injustice *should* make him (and us) angry.

“Sooner or later, every Christian experiences a faith crisis — some of us numerous ones.” But though the psalmist is addressing God with urgent earnestness, I don’t believe his anger is directed toward God. It’s directed toward the wicked who are wreaking such destruction. The psalmist is turning to God with his burning indignation toward evil perpetrators and his tearful compassion toward victims *because* his hope is in God to bring justice and deliverance to bear.

That’s why he *prays*.

We too witness, and sometimes are victims of, such wicked injustices. In our day, innocent, defenseless unborn babies are legally murdered, and children as well as vulnerable or entrapped adults are trafficked for sex, all financially profiting those perpetrating the injustices. In the face of such things, we cannot keep silent. First and foremost, before God. Out of compassion for afflicted ones and righteous anger toward perpetrators, we pour out our lamenting hearts to the God in whom we hope (Psalm 43:5) and from whom we receive hope (Psalm 62:5).

Learning to Cry Out in Crisis. But still, those opening lines of the psalm sound like God is the recipient of at least some of the psalmist’s anger:

Why, O Lord, do you stand far away?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Psalm 10:1)
If that’s not anger or disillusionment or disappointment, what is it? It’s putting into words the painful perplexity of a crisis of faith.

Now, a faith crisis should not be confused with faith abandonment. Nearly every saint experiences faith crises of different kinds, and typically we must endure faith crises in order for faith to grow and strengthen — more on that in a moment. But the clearest evidence that this psalmist is not forsaking God *is the presence of this psalm* — the psalmist is praying! And in his prayer, he’s doing with God what all of us do with those we love and cherish deeply who act (or seem not to act) in ways we don’t understand: he’s honestly expressing his confusion and pain. The psalmist’s soul is troubled that his biblically informed knowledge of God’s character does not seem to match the reality he’s observing. He believes “God is a righteous judge” (Psalm 7:11) who “executes justice” for the helpless and vulnerable (Deuteronomy 10:18). But he’s not seeing justice executed for the helpless and vulnerable. He’s seeing the wicked oppressor of the helpless “prosper at all times” (Psalm 10:5). Why God isn’t immediately stopping this injustice is beyond him. It’s a moment of crisis for him, and he’s telling God so.

I think it wrong, however, to assume that, because the psalmist asks God why he seems distant or hidden, he’s blaming God or scolding God for neglecting his responsibilities. What he’s doing is describing his *experience* of reality — the way the situation appears to him through his finite senses. And the reason he’s praying this way is precisely because he cares so deeply for God, because he loves and trusts God.

This is a faithful Christian response to a faith crisis. When we are painfully perplexed by the apparent discontinuity between what we know of God from the Scripture and what we observe in the world, when the mystery of God’s providential purposes meets the finiteness of our understanding, and it doesn’t make sense to us, God wants us to cry out to him. He wants us to cry out to him precisely *because* we love and trust him, even when our experience challenges what we believe.

Forging Christian Hedonists. The fact that the Bible speaks so honestly about reality is part of its self-authenticating quality; unvarnished honesty is one sign of sincerity and truth. And the fact that the Bible features a psalmist’s faith crisis over the problem of evil is part of why the Psalms have comforted so many for so long; we experience such crises too.

Sooner or later, every Christian experiences a faith crisis — some of us numerous ones. But a *crisis of faith* does not mean a *loss of faith*. In fact, it is often through faith crises that we learn what faith really is.

Scripture is full of accounts of saints enduring many kinds of faith crises, where the God who governs reality, in all its bloody brutality, does not meet the saints’ understanding and expectations, leading those saints to wrestle deeply. The Hebrews 11 “Hall of Faith” is lined with such saints, who through crises learned what it really means to “*walk by faith, not by sight*” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

I mentioned earlier that Christian Hedonists love to pray Psalm 73:25–26:

Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

What I didn’t mention is that Psalm 73 is another account of a faith crisis, and this prayer is part of the fruit of that crisis. So, when your own crises come, don’t assume your faith, love, and joy are gone, but that God wants to grow them in the furnace of affliction. Because the forging of a Christian Hedonist often occurs in the fires of a faith crisis.

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/faith-is-forged-in-crisis>