24/7 PRAYER RESOURCES

Notes

In this prayer series, we have been exploring ways in which different people make connection with God in prayer. For some, connection comes most easily through the outside world—they glimpse God most readily through the lens of nature, friends and everyday life. For others, the journey towards God starts by shutting out the world, and allowing stillness and solitude to open up deep places within them. Our final study explores an altogether different 'way in'.

Prayer Personalities (Part 3)

Wrestling through

By Lyndall Bywater

Psalm 94 (NLT)

1 *O LORD, the God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, let your glorious justice shine forth!*

2 *Arise, O Judge of the earth. Give the proud what they deserve.*

3 *How long, O LORD? How long will the wicked be allowed to gloat?*

4 *How long will they speak with arrogance? How long will these evil people boast?*

5 *They crush your people, LORD, hurting those you claim as your own.*

6 *They kill widows and foreigners and murder orphans.*

7 *"The LORD isn't looking," they say, "and besides, the God of Israel doesn't care."*

8 *Think again, you fools! When will you finally catch on?*

9 *Is he deaf—the one who made your ears? Is he blind—the one who formed your eyes?*

10 *He punishes the nations—won't he also punish you? He knows everything—doesn't he also know what you are doing?*

11 *The LORD knows people's thoughts; he knows they are worthless!*

12 *Joyful are those you discipline, LORD, those you teach with your instructions.*

13 *You give them relief from troubled times until a pit is dug to capture the wicked.*

14 *The LORD will not reject his people; he will not abandon his special possession.*

15 *Judgment will again be founded on justice, and those with virtuous hearts will pursue it.*

16 *Who will protect me from the wicked? Who will stand up for me against evildoers?*

17 *Unless the LORD had helped me, I would soon have settled in the silence of the grave.*

18 *I cried out, "I am slipping!" but your unfailing love, O LORD, supported me.*

19 *When doubts filled my mind, your comfort gave me renewed hope and cheer.*

20 *Can unjust leaders claim that God is on their side—leaders whose decrees permit injustice?*

21 *They gang up against the righteous and condemn the innocent to death.*

22 *But the LORD is my fortress; my God is the mighty rock where I hide.*

23 *God will turn the sins of evil people back on them. He will destroy them for their sins.*

The LORD our God will destroy them.

Over the years, I've read much about how to have a blessed and fruitful personal prayer time, but I'm not sure I've ever come across anyone who recommends the opening verses of Psalm 94 as a good way in. We tend to believe that the most right and appropriate way to approach God is in an attitude of peace and positivity. After

Notes

all, he is our maker and our saviour, and we owe him our lives.

To come to prayer in any other state might even be considered ungrateful and disrespectful. But this psalmist has no such qualms.

Our other two psalmists have begun their journeys in prayer by receiving. They have seen or remembered things which have drawn them towards prayer. They have chosen to leave the cares of the world, and turn their gaze on the goodness of God. By contrast, this poet does not begin with God. He begins with the turmoil in his own head. He tells God, in no uncertain terms, exactly what he thinks of the world around him (verses 3–7).

Like the first psalmist we met, he has been out and about in his community, but in his case, what he has seen has not inspired praise, but fury. He has witnessed corruption and injustice; he has seen vulnerable people oppressed; he has seen innocent lives destroyed. Where others might enter the presence of God walking serenely or leaping joyfully, this man is swept in on a roiling sea of anger and pain.

For him, the first few moments of prayer are not an awe-struck intake of breath, they are an anguished tirade, as he beats his fists on the ground in frustration. He even interrupts his discourse with the Almighty to deliver a masterfully compelling speech to the evildoers themselves (verses 8-10).

Only then, when he has shouted himself hoarse, does he begin to tune to the divine perspective. You can almost hear the deep sigh, as he begins to surrender his frustration into God's hands (verse 11).

At this point, it seems he is left with a choice. He can allow his anger to turn to bitterness, and so distance himself from God, or he can let go of his anger, and so be available to receive from God. The former is deadly to prayer, whilst the latter is cathartic, and often the perfect doorway into a deeper awareness of God's presence.

Verses 12 and 13 are evidence that he chooses to let go. Having dwelt on the sins of others, he does the healthiest thing he can do: he calls to mind his own need for correction and discipline. In his righteous indignation, he will not give way to self-righteousness.

Having taken the position of humility, he then turns his mind to eternal truths. He chooses to look away from the sights which have so appalled him, and to look instead at the ageless, unchanging truth of who God is (verse 14), and he reminds himself of how these intractable problems of fallen humanity will one day be resolved (verse 15).

Yet, this is clearly an activist at prayer. No sooner has he allowed God to restore his perspective, than he is looking outwards again, straining to see the transformations he has prayed for (verse 16). For some people, prayer is, at its best, blessed escapism. They find it easiest to encounter the living God when the troubles of their world are left outside the secret place. For others, however, it is precisely those troubles which propel them deeper into an awareness of God's presence, and it is those troubles which also compel them back into the world, as soon as the last 'amen' has left their lips.

We fall easily into the trap of assuming that activists are less 'good at prayer' because they find stillness and disconnection unsatisfying, yet Psalm 94 is the deep heartcry of a prayerful man. Far from being a distraction or a sign of immaturity, his turbulent emotions and his urgency to see transformation are, for him, the very vehicles which propel him into God's presence.

As well as the psalmists, each of these studies has introduced us briefly to a personality from church history, so we will finish with the words of St Ignatius of Loyola –the prayer of a compassionate activist:

'Dearest Lord, teach me to be generous. Teach me to serve You as You deserve; to give and not to count the cost; to fight, and not to heed the wounds; to labor, and not to seek to rest; to give of myself, and not to ask for reward, except the reward of knowing that I am doing your will. Amen.'