



### SEASON OF EASTER

## Hope in Isolation

*(The following article was written by James Fraser and it appeared on the website of Release International)*



Release International, founded in 1968 is an inter-denominational Christian ministry working through local church partners in more than 25 countries, helping persecuted Christians prayerfully, pastorally and practically.

The coronavirus has made a huge impact on all our lives. Lockdown and self-isolation are the words of the moment. We are all trying to adjust to different ways of doing just about everything from work to shopping, from school to church. We are all struggling with the reality of being physically confined and cut off from family and friends.

In many ways this new experience gives us a window into the **regular experience of persecuted Christians, especially those who are in prison because of their faith.** Hebrews 13:3 tells us to remember those in prison as if we were with them. And I think our present lockdown situation gives us a real opportunity to do that.

It is always good for us to find a biblical perspective on these things and one place we can get that is Psalm 142. Here's a bit of background before we read it.

#### The context

Psalm 142 is one of the few psalms that gives us a concrete historical context. The introductory heading says, "A Maskil of David, when he was in the cave." And if we go back to 1 Samuel we know that there were two occasions when David was in a cave – both of them when he was on the run from King Saul. It is most likely that this psalm came out of his first experience recorded in 1 Sam 22. He had just learned that it was Saul's intention to kill him. He had to leave everything behind and go on the run. He was moving from place to place, he was being pursued and he was afraid. Eventually he finds a cave to hide in, and then he prays this psalm.

- 1 I cry aloud to the Lord;  
I lift up my voice to the Lord for mercy.
- 2 I pour out before him my complaint;  
before him I tell my trouble.

- 3 When my spirit grows faint within me,  
it is you who watch over my way.  
In the path where I walk  
people have hidden a snare for me.
- 4 Look and see, there is no one at my right hand;  
no one is concerned for me.  
I have no refuge;  
no one cares for my life.
- 5 I cry to you, Lord;  
I say, "You are my refuge,  
my portion in the land of the living."
- 6 Listen to my cry,  
for I am in desperate need;  
rescue me from those who pursue me,  
for they are too strong for me.
- 7 Set me free from my prison,  
that I may praise your name.  
Then the righteous will gather about me  
because of your goodness to me.

#### Intent (verses 1-2)

The first is intent. When you read verses 1-2 you realize that they are not actually part of the prayer. David is not yet talking directly to God in these verses. It is more like he is talking to himself. And actually, the verbs in these first two verses can be translated in the future tense so it could read something more like – "With my voice I will cry out to the Lord; with my voice I will plead for mercy." It seems like David is not quite in the right place to pray yet – he knows he needs to – but he is not there yet, so he starts to talk himself into it.

Sometimes we can be like that when we are in a situation of stress or anxiety. Our first reaction is to focus on the problem, to be overcome by the fear of the moment. And it takes a conscious effort for us to move beyond that fear to start talking to God.

The American pastor, Andrew Brunson, was imprisoned in Turkey for two years before he was eventually released in October 2018. He recently wrote a book about his experiences called *God's Hostage*.



In that book he says that during his time in prison he found it very hard to sense God's presence and he experienced many dark days of doubt and fear. But he also says that he was eventually able to get to the place where he committed to trust God as an act of his will. Even though his emotions were telling him to doubt and fear he talked himself towards faith.

So verses 1-2 are about David's intent to pray. And they also show us something of the desperation of this Psalm. David talks about crying out and pleading for mercy. He is going to pour out his complaint and speak of his trouble. This is intense.

### **Trouble (3-4)**

And that brings us to the second heading – trouble. In verses 3-4 David goes into a more detail about what is causing him such anxiety. He says that in the path where he walks, they have hidden a trap for him. His enemies are out to get him, and they will use every tactic possible. Deception, lies, and traps. David has to live with the pressure of always looking over his shoulder, of always sleeping with one eye open, of always being suspicious of the people he deals with, always second-guessing their motives.

The minority Christian population in Pakistan lives with the fear of being falsely accused under the notorious blasphemy laws. Often these laws are used to settle petty personal scores and jealousies. I



met one Pakistani Christian man who had to flee to Sri Lanka. His business had been doing well and his neighbours didn't think it was appropriate for a Christian to be successful. So they waited for their chance and made an allegation against him. They set a trap for him. And even though the courts later acquitted him the mob was still out to get him, so he had to leave the country.

So there are traps for David. And there is also isolation. Look at verse 4. *"There is no one who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for my soul."* This is a picture of intense isolation, of abandonment, of someone who feels utterly forgotten. Perhaps there is no greater suffering for the human soul than to be forgotten. We can almost cope with being hated but to be forgotten strips us of something that is fundamental to human nature – the need to be known and to belong.

Today there are hundreds of Christians imprisoned in Eritrea because of their faith, and around 170 of them have been in prison for 10 years or more. They have never been tried or sentenced. They have no idea how long they will be there. Often, they are not allowed to see their families and the conditions they are kept in are degrading. They must feel forgotten. When I try to put myself in their shoes, I can't help but feel a sense of despair.

In his commentary on this Psalm, the Old Testament Commentator Derek Kidner says this: "The strain of being hated and hunted is almost too much, and faith is at full stretch."

### **Prayer (5-7a)**

It is almost too much for David. Faith is at full stretch, but it hasn't snapped. And now David gets to the place where he can pray, and he starts to cry out directly to God. That is our next heading – Prayer. Look at verse 5. "I cry out to you, O Lord; I say you are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living." He

has just said he has no refuge but now he is able to recognize that the Lord is his refuge, his shelter, his protection.

The word portion here is significant. Every Israelite family had a portion of land that belonged to them in perpetuity. They were not allowed to sell it outside their family. It was their own little piece of the promised land, their security, their identity, their safety net. David is a political fugitive, he no longer has this portion of land, but he begins to see that he has a greater security – the Lord himself is his portion.

David's extreme isolation is pushing him towards extreme dependence on God and he starts to come alive – it is at this point that hope begins to emerge. In one of his letters from a German prison during the Second World War Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this: "It's as if in solitude the soul develops organs of which we were hardly aware in everyday life."

Our partner from South Korea, Dr Eric Foley, often recalls the first conversation he had with a North Korean Christian. Dr Foley asked him – how can we pray for you? And the North Korean believer said this, "Pray for us? We pray for you. The problem with you American and South Korean Christians (UK too) is that you have so much money and so much freedom that you end up putting your faith in your money and freedom. We North Korean Christians have only Christ, and we have learned that He is sufficient."

In that cave David was experiencing what so many persecuted Christians continue to experience today, and what we in the West with all our insurance policies and financial assets and pension schemes struggle to appreciate – a relationship with God that is founded on utter dependence, that is so close and so real that it makes what seem like insurmountable problems somehow fade into the background. When there is nowhere else to turn, they find that there is nowhere else they would rather be.

So, in his prayer David comes to terms with who God is and this gives him boldness to go on and ask for his situation to be changed. He prays three things: "attend to my cry... deliver me from my persecutors... [and] bring me out of prison."

And do you notice why he wants to get out of prison? So that he may give thanks to God. He doesn't want freedom for freedom's sake. He wants freedom so that he can give glory to God, so that he can testify to God's strength and power, so that he can serve God's purposes.

We should rightly campaign for freedom of religion and belief in countries across the world where it doesn't exist. But that relatively modern political concept of freedom of religion shouldn't be our highest goal. God's glory and God's kingdom should be, and God's kingdom doesn't depend on freedom of religion. Today the church is growing fastest in places like Iran, China and North Korea where that doesn't exist.

Some Christian prisoners have actually been content to stay behind bars because they understand that their imprisonment is serving God's higher purposes. They actually see their imprisonment as a calling. Can you imagine that? We're quite happy to say that God has called me to such and such a ministry

or such and such a place, but could we bring ourselves to say God has called me to a prison cell?

Ebrahim is currently in exile in Iran after serving a five-year prison sentence for his church activities. While he was in prison he wrote this: “We sometimes have to sacrifice our freedom to live in God’s love...my freedom and getting out of prison cannot be my only purpose...If my being in prison stirs the international community to work to prevent such future persecution of new believers, then my choice is to remain in prison.”

In Eritrea Twen has spent the past 15 years in prison after being arrested at an underground prayer meeting. She could have been released if she had signed a piece of paper stating that she would no longer engage in Christian activities. But she refused. Since then she has had opportunities to escape when she was on medical leave but each time she chose to return to the prison so she could serve the other female prisoners.

### Hope (7b)

Finally, at the end of the Psalm David expresses hope that God will answer his prayer. That is our last heading – Hope. In the second half of verse 7 he says, “The righteous will surround me, for you will deal bountifully with me.” David anticipates that he will soon be out of the cave and able to re-join the community of God’s people. God will vindicate him, and he will take his place among the congregation. He will literally be surrounded by the righteous.

Christian prisoners today continue to hope for this. For release and vindication, but perhaps even more so, they long for fellowship with other Christians – to be surrounded by the righteous. There is an immediate application in this for us.

In verse 4 David had said, “Look to the right and see: there is no one who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for my soul.” Maybe this is just an emotional expression of his deep loneliness. But it could also be seen as an indictment against the wider community of God’s people. Why was there no one beside him, why is there nowhere he can run to, why is it that no one even cares? Are they scared of association with a fugitive? Are they embarrassed by him? Are they just too busy with other stuff?

What is our attitude when we think of prisoners of faith today? Is it too dangerous to add our name and address to a petition to a hostile government? Is it too embarrassing to stand up for them in our secular culture that doesn’t understand why they had to go and cause trouble with their religion in the first place? Is it too time consuming to find out information about them and add them to our prayer list that already takes more than five minutes to get through?

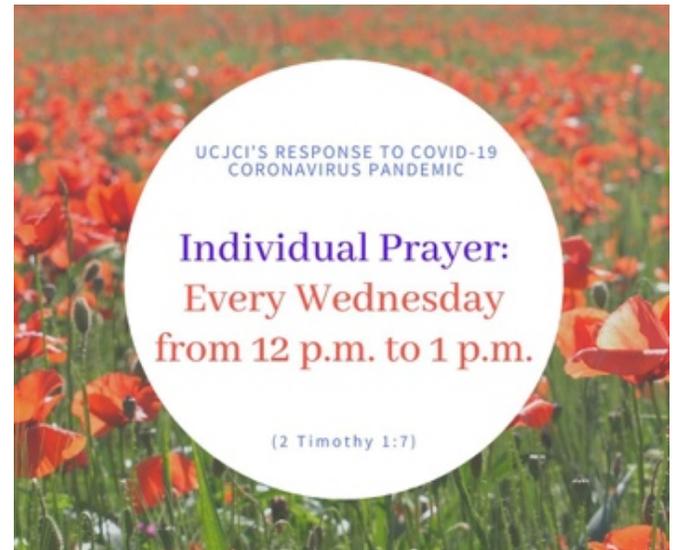
David asks these questions in the depths of his isolation. But actually, when you read 1 Samuel 22 you find out that it wasn’t long before people did start to gather round him and care for him. Verse 1 of that chapter says that his brothers came to him.

During his time in the cave David persevered in prayer. In his experience of isolation, he discovered hope in God. Our

persecuted brothers and sisters today have a similar story. And we can too in our own moment of isolation.

### Some questions to reflect on:

1. Have you ever been in a position like David where you were gripped by the anxiety and fear of a moment and found it difficult to pray? How did you work through that?
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about the soul ‘developing new organs’ in solitude, and a North Korean believer says, “We have only Christ and we have found that He is sufficient.” What do you think about this? Do you see your present confinement as an opportunity to grow in your relationship with God? How will you do that?
3. Do you think it would be possible to serve God if you were confined to a prison cell? How? What do you think about the examples of Ebrahim and Twen?
4. A key part of David’s hope at the end of the Psalm is for renewed fellowship with God’s people. How important is it for you to be surrounded by God’s people? Has this changed since we have been in lockdown?
5. In light of your own current experience, and what you have learned from meditating on this Psalm, how will you practically respond to the call of Hebrews 13:3?



### Worship the Lord

-on Radio Cayman 89.9 every Sunday at 7:45 am-  
May 4. Rev. Christopher Mason

May 4. (Sunday) 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Local United Church Worship Services will be distributed via video links.

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292 Prospect Point Road  
P.O. Box 1700 Grand Cayman KY1-1109 CAYMAN ISLANDS  
Tel: 1 345 947 1963 Email: [rdgs@cicucjci.com](mailto:rdgs@cicucjci.com) or [cirmcinfo@gmail.com](mailto:cirmcinfo@gmail.com)  
Website: [unitedchurch.org.ky](http://unitedchurch.org.ky)