

Screams of Faith

By David Feddes

Have you ever screamed at God?

The daily news is filled with pain and death. You see natural disasters, war, and terrorism on your TV. You hear horrifying tales of children being abused and molested. You shudder at the awful diseases and accidents that destroy so many lives. When such things happen, you may feel like screaming.

It's hard enough to know that such horrors exist in the lives of others, and it's even harder when these horrors attack you personally: when you are the one whose home is a heap of rubble; when you are the one facing the terrors of war; when you are the one who's been molested by someone you trusted; when you are the one asking yourself which is worse, the cancer or the chemotherapy; when you are the one gripped by depression; when you are the one standing at the grave of someone you loved.

Have you ever screamed at God, "Why? Why this? Why me? Why now? Why, God, have you abandoned me to trouble? If you're so good, why are things so bad? If you're so powerful, why don't you do something to change the situation? I pray and I pray, but nothing happens. If you intend to create heaven on earth, then what's taking so long? How much longer do we have to wait?"

If you've ever screamed at God, or if you've ever felt like screaming but didn't quite dare, this message is for you. What you need to know is this: Sometimes it's okay to scream at God.

Scriptural Screams

You don't have to take my word for it. Take God's Word for it. The longest book in the Bible is a collection of model prayers, the book of Psalms. When you listen to these model prayers, you hear many different things. As you'd expect in a prayer book, you hear some enthusiastic prayers of praise and thanksgiving. But that's not all you hear. You also hear protests. You hear groans. You even hear screams.

Some of us have the idea that we have to be very careful, very polite, very flattering when we talk to God. But in the Bible we find people who protest to God, who cry out to him, who even scream at him. The screams recorded in the Bible are not prim and proper. They are bold, almost impertinent. When I read some of them, I almost catch myself saying, "You can't talk to God like that!" But they *do* talk to God like that.

Take Psalm 44, for example. Psalm 44 begins by saying, "We have heard with our ears, O God; our fathers have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago." Sounds okay so far. This person has faith; he believes the stories about the great things God did in the past.

But here's the problem: lately things have taken a turn for the worse. The Lord has allowed his people to be crushed by a foreign army, for no apparent reason. "All this happened," cries the psalmist, "though we have not forgotten you or been false to your covenant" (v. 17). The people haven't left the Lord, but he seems to have left them.

Now what? God may have done great things in the past, but it doesn't look like he's done anything lately. Why not? What's the matter with him? Has he been sleeping? Has he decided to look the other way while all these dreadful things happen to his people? Is his memory failing? Psalm 44 ends with these desperate and startling words:

Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? We are brought down to the dust; our

bodies cling to the ground. Rise up and help us; redeem us because of your unfailing love (Psalm 44:23-26).

How can anyone talk to God like that? It sounds almost like a shriek of unbelief. It certainly isn't the nice, pious prayer of a well-dressed churchgoer who calmly folds his hands, smiles happily at God, and proceeds to count his blessings.

But it is still a prayer of faith. The psalmist clearly has faith that God is real. He wouldn't be screaming and complaining to the Lord if he didn't believe there was a Lord to scream at. The very fact that the writer of this psalm directs his screams at God means that he believes in him.

And he doesn't just believe that God exists. He also believes that God is a God who acts. He's heard the great stories of God's mighty power and astonishing miracles, and he believes every one of them. He believes them as strongly as he ever did. Unbelief isn't his problem; faith is. If he simply dismissed those stories as tall tales, he wouldn't expect anything of God. It's *because* he believes the stories that he is so disappointed. He says, "God, I know that you did all those great things. I'm convinced of it. That's why I can't understand why you haven't rescued us from the mess we're in right now."

In the end, after screaming his lungs out to get God's attention, the psalmist appeals to God's love. He says, "Rise up and help us; redeem us because of your unfailing love." Even after all the sorrow and disappointment, the man still believes that God is real and powerful and loving, and he still expects God to do something. So you can call his screams whatever you want, but they are clearly screams of faith.

Sometimes it's okay to scream at God. If you think that God's people should never scream, then take a closer look at the model prayers recorded in the Bible, and listen to the Son of God himself. Probably the best-known scream in the book of Psalms is found at the beginning of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer." The Bible says that when Jesus hung on the cross, enduring all the horror of this sin-shattered world, he "cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). The Bible reverberates with screams and anguished questions like that awful cry of Jesus. At first these cries may sound like shouts of defiance and unbelief; but in reality they are screams of faith.

Questioning God

Some well-meaning people say, "You should never question God. He is sovereign. His plan is perfect. If you have faith, you won't question him. You may not see it now, but you need to believe that God is using your suffering to produce something beautiful." Perhaps they remind you that God's great plan is like embroidery. When someone embroiders a design into a piece of cloth, the back side of the cloth is all twisted and tangled with knots of thread, but if you look at the other side, the picture is lovely. In the same way, when we look at God's plan from our perspective right now, it may look tangled and not very attractive, but when we see it someday from a new perspective, we'll see how orderly and beautiful it really is.

Now, there's a lot of truth in that. God does indeed have a plan, and he does have the power to make something beautiful even out of the greatest evil. But does that mean we always have to stifle our screams and sing a hymn when we're suffering? Does it mean we must never question God?

Maybe your problem isn't with how the picture will look someday but with how you feel right now. No matter how wonderfully the picture will eventually turn out, you may feel that

every time God adds another stitch to his embroidery, he is jabbing you with the needle, and it hurts. Other people may tell you to admire the embroidery and not to scream or ask questions, but they're not the ones being jabbed. It's one thing to be a spectator; it's another to be a sufferer.

Christians believe in the sovereignty of God. Jesus taught that not even the smallest detail escapes God's attention or falls outside his plan. He said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are numbered" (Matthew 10:29-39).

But what if it's not just a sparrow that falls? What if it's a person you love dearly? And what are you supposed to say when the God who numbers the very hairs of your head allows every last hair to fall out during chemotherapy—and even then allows the cancer to continue its deadly work? We wouldn't expect things to be any different if God weren't in charge—but God is in charge. Believing that God is in control doesn't take away the pain or make the questions disappear. In some ways it makes the questions even harder. Why does a loving and powerful God allow all this to happen? Christians believe in the sovereignty of God, all right. That's exactly why they scream "Why?" when things just don't seem to make any sense.

They scream "Why?" when they suffer themselves, and they scream "Why?" when they see injustice and violence destroying others. The prophet Habakkuk saw people exploiting each other, he saw them getting away with murder, and it bothered him terribly. He was very sensitive to suffering and oppression and injustice. He couldn't take it lightly, so he asked: "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds" (Habakkuk 1:2-3).

Is that a cry of unbelief? No, it's a cry of faith, faith in the midst of deep pain and bewilderment. If the biblical prophet could question God and ask, "Why do you tolerate wrong?" then perhaps we may ask the same question. We can't understand why God allows bad people to hurt others. We can't see why God doesn't immediately stop evil in its tracks. Why allow terrorists to destroy people who are minding their own business? Why allow war and violence? Why allow bad parents to harm children? Why allow crooks and street gangs to cause so much misery? If we had a chance to ask God a direct question, a lot of us would like to ask him why he allows so much sin and so much suffering. Like the prophet Habakkuk, we want to ask God, "Why do you tolerate wrong?"

Should we stifle cries like that? Should we pretend we have no question? Never! If we can look at the abuse of children, the violence in our cities, the injustice and bloodshed in our world—if we can look at all this and not scream right along with the prophet, if we can be aware of such horrors and never ask "Why?" then there is something wrong with us. If things like this don't make us scream, it's not because our faith is so strong. It's because we are hardened to the pain of people who are being crushed in this sin-cursed world.

If God's sovereignty means we can't ask him questions, if his perfect plan means we may never scream "Why?" then how do we explain the fact that the Bible's model prayers are full of questions, that God's people again and again asked "Why?", and that even the Son of God himself screamed "Why?"

You see, a scream of anguish isn't necessarily a snarl of defiance. To ask "Why?" is a cry of bewilderment, not a declaration of unbelief. You don't question God unless you believe there's a God to question. You don't ask why if you didn't believe that God is in control or if you think God didn't have a plan. You ask why precisely because you believe God does have a reason for

everything—and for the life of you, you can't see what that reason is. "Why?" is a scream that combines very deep pain with very deep faith in the sovereignty of God.

Beware of Prosperity Preachers

So beware of anyone who tries to stifle the screams of faith. Beware of prosperity preachers. Beware of people who say that if you just have enough faith, God will make you rich, God will make you healthy, God will give you all the things you pray for, and you'll be gloriously successful and happy 24 hours a day. Is God some great vending machine in the sky? Is faith just pushing a button to get what you want?

This health-and-wealth gospel demeans God. It devastates God's people when they suffer. The health-and-wealth message says that if you're suffering and you feel like screaming, it must be your own fault. You simply haven't had enough faith that God would bless you, and so he hasn't.

How can anybody dump that kind of garbage on people in the name of Jesus? Jesus was "a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering." He didn't live in luxury. Jesus never even owned his own home. Jesus was "despised and rejected." Jesus died in agony and disgrace when he was in his early thirties.

And yet some religious teachers insist that Jesus means painless prosperity. The road of suffering is only for spiritual losers. Possibly you've met up with people who talk this way. They stand at your hospital bed and tell you that the reason you haven't been healed is that your faith isn't strong enough. They tell you that the reason your business is failing is that you don't have enough faith that God wants you to be rich. These people approach the suffering of others the way Job's friends approached Job's suffering. Instead of sharing in the sorrow of others, they become experts at handing out blame and calling for more faith. They reject the Bible's command to "mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). Instead, they scold those who mourn and tell them to stop crying and have more faith.

My friend, don't be fooled by prosperity preachers. Don't let other people make you feel guilty for the sufferings you're going through. Don't let anyone stifle your screams of faith.

Praying Without Pretending

Come to God just as you are. Pray without pretending. Tell the Lord exactly how you feel. Tell him your questions. Tell him your pain and fear, your grief and confusion. Come to God just as you are, not as you think you ought to be. God knows your heart, so why try to fool him? Why pretend you don't have any questions, when you are full of questions? Why pretend you're happy, when you can't keep back the tears? Don't pretend. Pray! Pour out your heart. Then beg for God's help. Scream for it, if necessary. Here's a model prayer found in Psalm 13.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, O Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me.

Notice how this prayer combines the desperate scream, "How long, O Lord?" with a strong faith in God's love and salvation. The Bible shows that it's possible to have faith in a mighty God who blesses and heals and saves, and still struggle with pain and suffering. You believe that the

Lord is going to make all things well, whether by restoring you in this life, or in the life to come—you believe that with all your heart, and yet you find yourself in such agony that you wonder how much more you can take. You don't doubt the final salvation; you're just distressed that it is so long in coming. At such a time, the cry "How long?" is a scream of faith. It expresses trust in the God who delivers his people and at the same time expresses sorrow that the deliverance hasn't yet come.

Sometimes it's okay to scream at God. In Luke 11 Jesus compares prayer to a man who has a visitor drop in during the night but doesn't have anything to feed him. So he goes to the house of a friend, bangs on the door, and yells, "Friend, I need you to give me three loaves of bread. I've got an unexpected visitor." The man inside shouts back, "Stop bothering us. The door is locked and we're all in bed. I can't get up now." But, says Jesus, if the person outside keeps yelling loud enough and long enough, the man is going to get out of bed and give him as much as he needs, if not because he's his friend, then simply because he's so bold and so bothersome.

According to Jesus, we don't always have to be polite and subdued in the way we talk to God. When faith is desperate, it becomes bold, almost brash. Sometimes we need to pray like we're trying to wake somebody up in the middle of the night. In fact, that's the kind of prayer we heard in Psalm 44: "Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Rise up and help us."

Loud Cries and Tears

Sometimes it's okay to scream at God. It's certainly better than the alternatives. One alternative would be to stick with polite, pleasant little prayers, pretending you don't have any questions. You could try to convince yourself that the problems aren't really so bad and that everything will go your way in the very near future. But that's not faith. It's fooling yourself. True faith goes to God without pretense, trusting that God is big enough and gracious enough to handle our pain and our questions.

Another alternative would be to give up on God altogether. You could simply refuse to believe in his sovereignty and his salvation. But where would that leave you? You wouldn't have any God to hear your protests, and you'd have no reason to expect that things should be any different.

The Bible shows a better way. If you're willing to see sin and suffering as the dreadful realities they are, and at the same time to trust in God as the one who controls all things and to trust in Jesus as the one who ultimately redeems and rescues his broken creation, then you can come to the Lord with your screams of faith. You can groan in the confidence that God hears. You can cry in the confidence that God cares.

Sometimes it's okay to scream at God. It's okay to shed tears and cry out to get his attention. After all, that's what Jesus did. In Hebrews 5 the Bible says, "During Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission... he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:7,9).

When we come to know God through Jesus Christ, we can ask our questions, and we can scream our screams of faith. Even when he doesn't give us direct answers to our questions, Jesus *is* the answer. Through his suffering and resurrection, Jesus brings the presence of God into even the darkest situation. He doesn't always spare us from the valley of the shadow of death, but he is in the valley with us.

In a suffering world, we don't need the phony God of the health-and-wealth gospel. We need the God of the cross. We need the Lord who became one of us, who took our sin and suffering

upon himself. We need the One who “offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears.” We need the perfect Son who cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We need the Savior who screamed his screams of faith as he suffered and died for us, and who was then raised up to everlasting life.

If we have never sought, we seek thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn marks on thy brow,
We must have thee, O Jesus of the scars.

The heavens frighten us, they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by thy scars we know thy grace.

If, when the doors are shut, thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of thine;
We know today what wounds are, have no fear;
Show us thy scars, we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong; but thou wast weak;
They rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but thou alone.

(Edward Shillito)