

“Bend an ear, God; answer me. I'm one miserable wretch!...” Wow! Talk about a cry for help! I really think this Psalm - Psalm 86 - really comes to life in the Bible translation of Peterson's *The Message*. I'm old fashioned enough to enjoy the beauty of the King James Version, but it just sounds a little too formal for this plea for help from the Psalmist. The KJV uses the words “Bow down thine ear, O Lord,” and that's certainly fine. But in this particular instance, I think the more modern rendition sounds more desperate - sounds more like a person at the end of his rope! “Bend an ear, God; answer me. I'm one miserable wretch! “Help your servant,” he pleads, “I'm depending on you!”

I think we all have at least an idea of what the psalm writer might be going through, don't we? Haven't we all felt like we're at the end of our ropes at one time or another?

I was thinking about to the early years of parenting - holy cow! - babies up all night crying, or one child with an earache and the other with a stomach virus can put us at end of our ropes fairly quickly. Or, wait a few years, and deal with teenagers who know everything.

Long days at work can also turn us into miserable wretches. We put in extra hours, we take work home with us, but never seem to get ahead.

I remember days when Richard worked in Corporate America. He'd get home at 7 or 8 o'clock, eat something, and then work in the upstairs office until midnight or later. And, of course, he'd be back in the office by 6 or 7 am.

Nowadays we're all tied to office or jobs by computers and cell phones, so there really is no break from work. Exhaustion and burnout are constant threats.

Now, we might think that a raise in salary or more vacation might help, but it's probably out of the question for our company. Not likely.

But... how about a perk? Yes, a perk. Just a little something extra. An amenity. A treat. A little something to ease the stress and strain of a difficult situation.

Startup companies have long had a reputation for offering enticing office perks, such as foosball tables and free lunches. But now some companies are taking perks to a new level, doing whatever they can to prevent their employees from feeling like miserable wretches.

Think most company meetings are b-o-r-i-n-g? Not so if you work at Yahoo in California. As part of its Influential Speakers Series, Yahoo presents Hollywood royalty like Tom Cruise and prolific thinkers like Deepak Chopra, among others. Employees work hard at Yahoo, but they are also encouraged to play hard. They can work off stress or have fun at the company's on-site gym equipped with basketball and sand volleyball courts. Oh yes, and workers also enjoy a social atmosphere with live concerts (like Taylor Swift) and parties and barbecues. According to a publication called *Fast Company*, a corporation named *Clue*, gives its employees “access to free private sessions from a professional therapist or life coach on a weekly basis.”

Whipsaw Inc. offers full-body professional massages every Friday to all employees.

Sometimes the best perk is to get away. At Global Citizen Year, 2 years of work earns you a trip out of the country, all expenses paid. After 3 years, you can take a month off to do what makes you happy, and your paycheck will keep coming.

But perks don't have to be exotic to be enticing. At a company called Acorns, they keep things simple. A book club. A sandbox - yes, for adults! Daily meditation.

So office perks run the full gamut from exotic to just meditation. Anything to keep workers from becoming miserable wretches.

As I mentioned, we all know that stress certainly isn't limited to the workplace. Caring for relatives or home with children take a toll on our emotional life.

Sometimes even being a faithful servant of God is difficult and full of stress.

No matter what our situation, there are times when we all need to ask for help. Fortunately, God answers when we call and offers us a full range of amenities to ease our stress and our strain.

So, exactly what are the perks of being a servant of God? Let's take a look at a few of them.

The first that comes to mind is the perk of *steadfast love*. Psalm 86 tells us that God is "good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love." (v.5).

This is an amazing gift because most of the love we experience in life is often fleeting and emotional.

Of course, the word "love" can mean a number of different things.

As one person said, "I love everybody. Some I love to be around. Some I love to avoid. And others I would love to punch!"

While it is true that God loves us, it's certainly not in the sense of wanting to punch. (Well, maybe a little "shake" now and then, perhaps, when we're doing something stupid - but not more than that!)

God's love is steadfast and consistent, firm and unwavering. That's because it's based on God's character, and it expresses God's generosity, faithfulness and mercy. That's why the psalm says that God is "good and forgiving," always seeking to lift our guilt, to heal our hearts and to be in a right relationship with us.

Another perk that comes to mind is *strength*. "Turn to me and be gracious to me," pleads the Psalm writer. "Give your strength to your servant." (v.16).

Elizabeth Foss, a mother of five children, says that what she remembers most about her 20s and 30s is fatigue. "For nearly 12 years now," she writes, "I've been sleep-deprived. When I am tired, I can be cranky and impatient. When my second child was about 6 months old, it dawned on me that I wasn't going to sleep like a normal person for a very long time. If I wanted to be at all happy, I needed a coping strategy."

What strategy did she come up with? To be honest and prayerful.

She writes, "Now, when I have a bad night, the first thing I do in the morning is acknowledge that it was a bad night. I tell God that I am grateful that he strengthened me so that I was able to be there to meet the needs of my children the previous night. I tell him that there is no way I will make it through the day under my own strength. I ask him to help me."

She reports that God always gives her strength, even if it's not sleep. I can personally remember having to live through some very difficult situations in my life - you know, the kind you look back on later and wonder how you made it. (And I know I'm not alone!)

In 1996, I was only three days into my seminary experience when Richard called to tell me he lost his job. You have to remember I hadn't been in school in 20 plus years - and it was tough stuff! I was also juggling a church music job in Jenkintown, PA, with seven choirs. I had an unhappy younger son who was a sophomore in high school - a shy kid in a new school - VERY unhappy. I was a commuter to Princeton from Neshanic Station and

then commuted to church in Jenkintown besides. I was overwhelmed with the heavy load of reading, studying and term papers.

I was overwhelmed by Richard's depression. I was overwhelmed by Stephen's depression. And, oh yes, did I mention my dad, living here in Ventnor 2 ½ hours away, got a blood clot in his lung during mid-term week?

There were days I just cried in my car - from fatigue, from worry, from life! But I also spent a lot of "car time" talking to God - mostly asking for strength. Somehow we all got through it. I claimed the perk of God's strength to see me through.

The next perk I thought about is *answer to prayer*. The Psalm writer said that "in the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me" (v.7). But what does it mean for God to answer our prayers?

I heard a story about a minister who owned a parrot with a vocabulary of cuss words that came from a previous owner. The minister was constantly embarrassed by the parrot. A woman in the congregation suggested a remedy. She would put the naughty parrot with her well-behaved female parrot who only said, "Let us pray."

The birds were put together. The pastor's bird took one look at the lady parrot and chirped, "Hi Toots! How about a little kiss?"

The lady parrot responded gleefully, "My prayers have been answered!"

Ok, that's not exactly the way prayers work. That's more like a "Santa Claus" prayer that Tony Campolo described from his own family.

One night, his 6 year old was going to bed. Before he climbed the stairs, he turned to the family and said, "I'm going to bed and say my prayers. Anyone want anything?"

To pray is to be in communication with God. Sure we can ask for specific things. But the real purpose of prayer is not to give God a laundry list of things we think we need. God already knows about them anyway.

To really pray is to change. Prayer starts the communication process between us and God. The more we pray, the more we come near to the heartbeat of God.

I believe prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform and change us.

Having relationship issues? Wondering what to do next in your life? Feeling overwhelmed by problems? Talk to God about them. Use Jesus' prayer suggestion: Thy will be done.

When you pray that, know for sure that God wants only the best for you. All the way back in the Old Testament, in the book of Jeremiah it says: "For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "Plans to give you hope and a future." (29:11).

The Apostle Paul gives us this fabulous advice: "Let us therefore come boldly to God's throne of grace, so that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16).

What a perk prayer is!

Lastly, God offers his servants the perk of *help and comfort*. Psalm 86 concludes with the writer saying that "You, Lord, have helped me and comforted me" (v.17).

When Jesus spoke to his disciples on the night before his own death, he promised that the Holy Spirit would come to them. Jesus said, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." (John 14:16). The Greek word Jesus used for "advocate" can also be translated "helper" or "comforter." It also has the connotation of "drawing alongside." The Holy Spirit helps and comforts us by walking right beside us as we journey thru life.

One last little story before I close. Dr. Rodney Cooper, a professor at Denver Seminary, told of growing up on pig farm. In one field there were 200 or 300 little pigs running around. It was his job as a child to go to the pen every day at 4 a.m. to feed the piglets. When he walked in, they would all scatter, except for one little pig who would come up and chew on his shoes.

One day, Cooper picked him up and began to pet him. Soon the piglet started to squirm, wanting to be put down to run free. Cooper said to the little fella, "I'll let you down when I'm ready."

At this point, the little pig let out a squeal and in about two seconds, 30 huge sows weighing about 600 pounds each came running. Cooper said, "I was ready! I put him down and headed for the fence, barely making it over before they caught me. They were snorting and daring me to bother one of their kids. The little pig was scared and out of control, but he had resources one squeal away. Think about it: If one of God's creatures is that sensitive to a squeal, how much more sensitive is God to us? Just one squeal away we have the best resource of all."

God is always there to be our Helper and Comforter. This is no small perk designed just to endure the stress and strain of doing God's work in the world. No, it's part of the very nature of God, shown to us in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "The Spirit abides with you, and he will be in you." (John 14:17).

You know, we are never alone as we face the challenges of life, because God's Spirit is living in us and working through us, as Helper and Comforter.

In addition, the Spirit makes those other perks of God available in our lives: Steadfast love, strength, and answers to prayer.

God's perks, delivered in person through the power of the Spirit, are not going to be part of a corporate compensation package. Instead, they are available to anyone who desires to be a servant - a true child of God.

Prayer List: Virginia, Jim, George, Betty, Beverly, Peggy, Dottie, Jack, Paul, Fred, Barbara, Doug, Larry, Charley, Kay, Michele, Marlise, Beth, Patricia, Allen, Wendy, Staci, Bobbi, Dunkin, Gloria and Nathan.