

When God Seems Far Away

Our second Scripture reading is the 22nd Psalm, one of the most clearly Messianic of the Psalms, foreshadowing the passion and death of our Savior, who himself quotes this psalm from the cross in what is called his cry of dereliction, his anguished cry to the Father who had forsaken him.

This psalm takes us deeply into the heart of the suffering Savior and also expresses the anguish of all who have ever felt abandoned by God. It is holy ground, where we sense we are meeting the very suffering heart of Jesus.

I'll read portions of **Psalm 22**.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

² *O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night but find no rest.*

³ *Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.*

⁴ *In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.*

⁵ *To you they cried and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.*

⁶ *But I am a worm and not human,
scorned by others and despised by the people.*

⁷ *All who see me mock me;
they sneer at me; they shake their heads;*

⁸ *“Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”*

⁹ *Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.*

¹⁰ *On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.*

¹¹ *Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is no one to help.*

.....
They stare and gloat over me;

¹⁸ *they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.*

¹⁹ *But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!*

²⁰ *Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!*

²¹ *Save me from the mouth of the lion!*

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

*²² I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:*

*²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!*

*²⁴ For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me
but heard when I cried to him.*

*²⁵ From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.*

*²⁶ The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live forever!*

*²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.*

*²⁸ For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.*

*²⁹ To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.*

*³⁰ Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord*

*³¹ and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.*

One of the worst emotions we can experience is the feeling of abandonment, that the ones that are supposed to love us and care for us the most have forsaken us. You and I may never experience actual abandonment to the degree of many in our own community, but we all likely will know the feeling that God has forsaken us, or at least is far away from us. Some time ago I received a letter and a book from an old friend, describing a litany of troubles that have beset him and his wife over the past two decades. One thing after another—beginning with the loss of his business to a scheming partner, followed by the deterioration of his and his wife’s health, and subsequent financial woes—portrayed the life of a broken man who still was holding to his faith in God. “But,” he added, I have some questions to ask the Lord when I see him.”

The question that this 22nd Psalm will help us to answer is “How should we respond when God seems far away?” This and other lament psalms tell us, as the prayer book of Israel and the Church, that it’s OK to cry out in complaint to God. When God seems far away we need to express the feeling of abandonment. David was the writer of this psalm and obviously penned it during a time of his own suffering and feeling of being forsaken by God. Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he penned a description of poetic images that would be fulfilled in the suffering of Christ a millennium later, but which obviously had an immediate if only symbolic

allusion to his own suffering. And in the first half of the psalm (vv. 1-21) he is crying out to God, who seems to have abandoned him.

The Message paraphrases verse 1 graphically: “God, God...my God!
Why do you dump me
miles from nowhere?”

David's cry seems to be one of dismay and bewilderment that God his Father would not be concerned about him and would leave him like an abandoned child. The use of “God” in this cry is used as the Hebrew equivalent for “Father.”

We hear almost daily about parents abandoning their children, but these are sinful and often substance-abusing or mentally deranged parents. But how can God forsake the children he has created and even brought us into this world like a midwife? (v.9) When he prays there seems to be no answer and no relief to his suffering and danger. In fact, it seems that his prayers get no higher than the ceiling and God is nowhere within his hearing. His circumstances are appearing hopeless. In fact, his enemies are planning his funeral, and already are gambling for his clothing that he'll leave behind (v.18).

You may well share my frustration with automated answering machines and endless recorded voice instructions when seeking help or information by phone. This is the type of frustration that David is expressing, only over a much deeper angst—that he might hear from God and receive some indication that he is available, accessible to him in his time of desperate need. It seems that his situation is hopeless, that God will not answer him in time to deliver him, that God is delaying with his answer and if he does answer it will be too late for his help.

David then implies that God is acting in a bewildering way that is inconsistent with his divine nature as the faithful, all-powerful and loving God. He says that this God who seems so indifferent and so far away is sitting on his heavenly throne, being praised by his people (vv. 3-4). And he is the same God that delivered his forefathers, who were not disappointed by answers to their prayers. Sometimes in the midst of trials and suffering, our theories about God and life simply don't make sense.

Jesus' friends, Mary and Martha, shared the belief of all good, Scripture-believing Jews in the first century, that there would be a general resurrection of all believers at the triumphant appearing of the Messiah on the last day. But Jesus was asking them if they believed *in him* as the resurrection and the life and that he could restore their dead brother Lazarus back to life (Jn.11:17ff). Sometimes our theoretical belief doesn't “work” when God seems so far away. And then we find ourselves, like Mary and Martha, blaming God because we can't explain him: “‘Lord,’ Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would not have died’” (Jn. 11:21). David also blames God, implying that because he is sovereign he was actually the one, not his enemies, about to put him to death (v.15c).

When God seems far away we do well to consider the fact of Christ's separation. Although this psalm originated in the mind and heart of David, due to his suffering, yet it is one of the most vividly Messianic passages in all of the Old Testament. What was true in part in David's life was

a mere adumbration of the much greater suffering of Jesus, who quoted, yea rather, cried the first words of this psalm during his agonizing suffering on the cross. For this reason, the prophetic meaning of this psalm, we sense ourselves to be on holy ground.

Christ Jesus was crying out from the cross, as we see in the gospels (Matt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34), because of his separation from the Father, which is a mysterious truth. Jesus cried these words from the cross, not because he simply felt abandoned as we may at times. But Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, was for the first time in all eternity actually separated from the Father's love. New Testament scholar CEB Cranfield noted the paradox that "while this God-forsaken-ness was utterly real, the unity of the Blessed Trinity was even then unbroken." The Father, who is "too pure to look on evil" (Hab. 1:13) turned away from the Son, who became sin for us upon the cross (2 Cor. 5:21). And yet the Father was not unaffected by the cross, as an uncaring, unloving father might turn away from his child's suffering. Paul says that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). During those hours, which in the mystery of God must have been an eternity of sin-bearing for the world, the Son was actually separated from the Father's love, which was the hell that Jesus suffered for us.

His cry of this prayer from the cross speaks of his atoning passion and death.

CS Lewis called this psalm "the terrible poem which Christ quoted in His final torture." "He who was without sin became sin for our sakes," and "plumbed the depth of that worst suffering which comes to evil men who at last know their own evil." John Calvin noted that had Christ's death been just physical, it would have been ineffectual as a sacrifice to atone for our sins. But Christ took our deserved punishment and thereby experienced "an actual and dreadful separation between Father and Son." Jesus expressed his horror over this "great darkness" and "God forsakenness" when he cried, "why have you forsaken me?" (J. Stott). "This is no dispassionate theological statement, but an agonized expression of a real sense of alienation, reflecting the full meaning of Jesus' death as a 'ransom for many,' and the only time in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus addresses God without calling him 'Father'" (RT France). As he became our sin-bearer he was shut off from the Father's love for the only period in all of eternity. This is what is meant by his atoning death being a substitution for us. Jesus, the eternal Son, suffered and died because of us and for us, that he might bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18).

And the fact of Christ's separation from the Father speaks to us about the continuing way of the cross. The way of the cross was difficult for Jesus' disciples to understand and to accept. Whenever he would talk about his looming arrest, trial and death, the disciples seemed to intentionally not hear what Jesus was saying. How could he, the awaited Messiah, who had come to save them, submit to such treatment? They could not grasp the idea of a suffering Messiah.

Nor did they understand that they also would have their own cross to bear, and that to follow Jesus would be to share in his ongoing sufferings in the world. In fact, right up to the very end of Jesus' ministry with them and on the very eve of his arrest, trial and crucifixion, the disciples were arguing with one another as to their hoped-for positions in the coming kingdom reign (Lk. 22:24-30).

But Psalm 22 is the prayer, not just of Jesus, but of all who would follow Jesus.

Suffering is part and parcel of living in a fallen world. No one, the believer included, is guaranteed exemption from suffering caused by disease and disasters, both natural and political, of which our world has seen plenty in recent months. Granted, some of our misery is caused by our human folly. But then there is the suffering Jesus said his followers would share with him, including rejection, alienation, opposition, and overt persecution (Jn. 15:18-16:4). And he calls all who would come after him as his learning followers (disciples) to deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow him. And a cross is a form of execution. We must die to personal desires that run counter to his purposes and must be willing to live a cruciform life that calls the world's attention to the suffering of our Lord and Savior (Matt. 16:24ff). And as we suffer with Jesus and "complete" the witness of his sufferings (Col. 1:24), we share but a fraction of the sufferings of the One who cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

An amazing cruciform life that shared the suffering of Jesus was that of the late Mother Teresa, known as "The Saint of Calcutta." Father Joseph summed up Teresa's almost life-long spiritual darkness and suffering, co-mingled with her great joy and delight in serving God. This 22nd Psalm is difficult for many Christians in the Western World to accept, not only because of the natural human aversion to suffering, but because we have neglected the plain teaching of Jesus and of all of Scripture about the necessary place of self-denial and suffering in the life of faith. Only one who is willing to die to self-centeredness and take the way of the cross can say with Paul, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and *the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings*, becoming like him in his death..." (Phil. 3:10).

The proper understanding of suffering as a part of the life of faithful discipleship is through the faith that comes through worship. Beginning with verse 22, David's mood seems to shift dramatically. From praying a lament he moves to praising the Lord for his deliverance. When God seems far away the only solution for the believer is to remain steadfast in worship, even when emotionally you are not "in the mood" to worship the Lord. As a psychologist told me one time, "It's easier to act your way into feeling than to feel your way into acting." David is resolved to worship and to give public praise and testimony to God's faithfulness. Note how he says with resolve, "I *will* declare" and "I *will* praise you" (v. 22). In the act of worship we are able to gain a right perspective of God, as we remember his acts of faithfulness in behalf of his people.

David's lament and subsequent praise and worship took place in the context of a caring, worshiping community. God has designed his community of people to be a fellowship of worship and fellowship, by which we as individuals find mutual encouragement and support. We have a calling to minister to one another and to encourage one another as we live through these times of the dark night of the soul. Not that we have easy, pious clichés to banter around, but that we communicate to our fellow sufferers the reliability of our friendship and our companionship on the journey of faith (Heb.10:25).

The perspective we gain in waiting upon the Lord and worshiping God is seeing the vindication of the Savior. David testifies that God has not despised him but has listened to his cry and will indeed deliver him in due time (v.24). David vows in the midst of his suffering to praise the Lord for his promised future deliverance.

Jesus quotes our psalm (v. 22) noting that his deliverance means that we share in his deliverance and vindication. Because Jesus was delivered and vindicated and “perfected” through his suffering and subsequent resurrection, we, as his brothers and sisters, are vindicated in our suffering as well (Heb. 2:11ff). Because we are in Christ, we participate, not only in his sufferings and death, but also in the power and victory of his resurrection. Regardless of the degree of our suffering, we can be certain of God’s presence, love and grace. Even though it may seem that God has forsaken us, we as his children never have to fear his abandonment. Christ suffered that abandonment in our place.

Because Jesus was raised, we too can walk in the victory of his resurrection (Rom. 6:4). We can know that whatever our circumstances, the sovereign victorious Lord is fulfilling his purposes for us (Ps.138:8). We are, as Paul says, “more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Romans 8:37). The One who suffered this horrible separation from the heavenly Father assures us that he will never leave or forsake us (Josh. 1:5; Ps. 37:25; Jn, 14:18; Heb. 13:5). David is given faith and hope to look beyond his suffering to the day when he will praise the Lord in the great assembly. Just as his lament transcended his personal suffering and prophesied the suffering of the Christ, so his faith and hope for his future deliverance and praise before the congregation transcended what he would experience in his mortal lifetime (vv. 22-31).

One thing that faith teaches us is to be still before the Lord and realize that to ask the Lord “why” we suffer is a futile question to ask in the midst of this fallen world order. Worship leads us to ask “What?” and “How?” We may well ask the Lord what he is teaching us during our dark night and we certainly should ask how we can cope each day and take steps of trusting obedience, one by one. But the “Why?” will have to wait till the consummation of the kingdom, when God brings our character to its full completion and perfection in holiness. Then, with our perfected understanding, when we no longer see “a poor reflection” (1 Cor.13:12), God will help us look back over our lives and let us see how our comparatively “light and momentary trials” achieved for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all (2 Cor. 4:17). Putting these trials in their proper perspective, against the backdrop of our glorious hope, we realize that “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

So, the day I received my friend’s letter of lamentation I called him. And this was my only word of encouragement to my suffering friend mentioned above: He is right, I will tell him, to not ask the “why” question till you see Jesus. In fact, he will immediately see the “why” of it all as he beholds the eternal glory that far outweighs all of his trials during his days of pilgrimage. When David looks at the greater glory of God, which will come to him when all the nations of the earth bow before him, his own momentary suffering seems to pale into insignificance.

When God seems far away we need to come back to this psalm, wherein God reminds us that he is always near us, even in our darkest hours when he seems far from us. Jesus experienced the ultimate separation from the Father that we might never be separated from his love. And let’s remember his promises that he will never leave us and is always with us.