

Psalm 22

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To the Chief Musician. Set to “The Deer of the Dawn.” A Psalm of David.

This Psalm was written by King David. It was set to music and became part of Israel’s Psalter for use in public worship. The Psalm speaks of events in David’s life, but, more than any other Psalm, it also looks forward to Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus may well have remembered the Psalm in His last hours. *“We can be fairly certain that Jesus was meditating on the Old Testament during the hours of his suffering and that He saw His crucifixion as a fulfillment of Psalm 22.”* (Boice). When interpreting a Psalm like this is best to start with exegesis (discovering the original intent and situation for which it was written), before then applying it to the events of the Cross, or to our own situation.

A. The agony of the forsaken one.

My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning? O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; and in the night season, and am not silent. v1,2. NKJV.

The psalm begins abruptly: someone who knows and trusts God is forsaken, and cries out to God in agony. The cry “My God” shows that the forsaken one had a real relationship with God. He was a victim of the cruelty of men, but the cry and the complaint is to God – even *My God* – and not to or against those who were harming him. The repetition of the plea shows the intensity of the agony. There is even a note of *surprise* that God should have forsaken him. The forsaken one seems bewildered: *“Why would my God forsake me?”* A further dimension was that he had made repeated appeals to God – day and night - and yet he felt utterly unheard. His groaning was unanswered, his cry ignored.

i. This is a *Psalm of David*. There were many instances in David’s life where he might write such an agonized poem, both before and after taking the throne of Israel. Many times he was in seemingly impossible situations and desperately needed God to come and rescue him. Many times he felt forsaken by God (including times that were of his own making). Yet many times, David had also experienced God’s deliverance, which made this situation even more disturbing. Why was God not delivering him this time? And worse, why was God not communicating with him, especially as God must have heard his many groans and cries.

ii. While the psalm was true of David, it is also true of Jesus the Messiah. Jesus had known great pain and suffering (both physical and emotional) during His life. Yet He had never known separation or alienation from God His Father. At this moment Jesus experienced something He had never experienced before: He felt forsaken by God the Father. Matthew 27:46.

On the cross, a holy transaction took place. God the Father regarded God the Son as if He were a sinner. *God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.* 2 Corinthians 5:21. Jesus not only endured the *withdrawal* of the Father’s fellowship, but also the outpouring of the Father’s *wrath* upon Him as a substitute for sinful humanity. *“This was the blackness and darkness of His horror; then it was that He penetrated the depths of the caverns of suffering.”* (Spurgeon) *“Then it was that He felt in soul and body the horror of God’s displeasure against sin, for which He had undertaken.”* (Trapp). *“To be forsaken means to have the light of God’s countenance and the sense of his presence eclipsed, which is what happened to Jesus as He bore the wrath of God against sin for us.”* (Boice). But this was all part of God’s good and loving plan of redemption, so Isaiah could say *Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him* Isaiah 53:10.

B. Remembrance of God’s nature and prior help.

Yet You are holy, enthroned in the praises of Israel. Our fathers trusted in You; They trusted, and You delivered them. They cried to You, and were delivered; they trusted in You, and were not ashamed. v3-5.

i. David reminds God that when *our fathers* were in similar situations they cried out to God and trusted Him. God delivered them back then, so David implies: “if you did it for them why aren’t you doing it for me?” David says this in a way that is respectful – not blaming or judging God for His apparent silence. Even when immersed in his suffering he knew that his present agony did not change God’s holiness (*You are holy*) or greatness (*You are enthroned in the praises of Israel*).

We have the sense that the present crisis filled David with doubt and confusion, yet he would not allow these doubts to question the holiness or greatness of God. As the fathers trusted God, he would trust God, regardless of the outcome.

ii. Jesus, of course, knew that God was faithful and could be trusted. In obedience He submitted Himself to the will of the Father regardless of the personal cost. *“For just as through the disobedience of the one man (Adam) many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of one man (Jesus) many will be made righteous.”* Romans 5:19. *“Here is the triumph of faith – the Saviour stood like a rock in the wide ocean of temptation. High as the billows rose, so did His faith, like the coral rock, wax greater and stronger till it became an island of salvation to our shipwrecked souls. It is as if He had said, ‘It matters not what I endure. Storms may howl upon Me; men despise; devils tempt; circumstances overpower; and God himself forsake me, still God is holy; there is no unrighteousness in Him.’”* (Stevenson, cited in Spurgeon).

C. Mocking the forsaken.

But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised by the people. All those who see me ridicule me; They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, “He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue him; Let Him deliver him, since He delights in Him!” v6-8.

i. The intensity of the situation made David feel not only ignored, but insignificant. Normally God helps people, but gives no help to worms. David felt so despised that he believed he was a worm and God was treating him accordingly. *“He felt himself to be comparable to a helpless, powerless, down-trodden worm, passive while crushed, and unnoticed and despised by those who trod upon him. He selects the weakest of creatures, which is all flesh; and becomes, when trodden upon, writhing, quivering flesh, utterly devoid of any might except strength to suffer. This was a true likeness of himself when his body and soul had become a mass of misery – the very essence of agony.”* (Spurgeon). And it wasn’t just God who was mocking David - everyone who saw him despised and ridiculed him. Worse, they used it as an excuse to call into question his relationship with God, just like the friends of Job did in his suffering. It was as if they were saying, *“You seem to trust in the Lord, and we all know that God rescues those who trust in Him. You are not being delivered from your troubles so God doesn’t care about you!”*

ii. These verses were dramatically mirrored in the way that Jesus was treated while hanging on the cross. Jesus’ enemies – bystanders, religious leaders and thieves – mocked, insulted and ridiculed Jesus, some even quoting from Psalm 22. See Matthew 27:39-44. Jesus’ enemies demonstrated the ignorance and cruelty of those who oppose God and His people, even today. They could see no deliverance, when it would indeed soon come. They questioned the relationship between the God and the One who was suffering, and they poured derision upon Him at His time of greatest suffering. *“How could the Lord of glory be brought to such abasement as to be not only lower than the angels, but even lower than men. What a contrast between ‘I am’ and ‘I am a worm’!”* (Spurgeon). *“He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely, He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.* Isaiah 53:4,5.

D. A plea by one in agony.

But You are He who took me out of the womb; You made me trust while on my mother’s breasts. I was cast upon You from birth. From my mother’s womb You have been my God. Be not far from me, for trouble is near; for there is none to help. v9-11.

i. Even though David felt forsaken by God he didn’t say: *“Since You seem to have abandoned me, I will abandon You.”* Rather, he recognised that God had been with him right from the moment of his birth, and this gave him strength to remain steadfast through this ‘dark night of the soul’. Even though he felt abandoned and was in agony, he knew he could still call out to God. His plea was that God would continue to be with him through the present time of trouble, just as He had been from the moment of his birth. But this was mixed in with a hint of desperation

as he also says *“No-one else is going to help me. So, You must help me, Lord!” “That child now fighting the great battle of his life, uses the mercy of his nativity as an argument with God. Faith finds weapons everywhere. He who wills to believe shall never lack reasons for believing.”* (Spurgeon).

ii. These verses reinforce the humanity of Jesus, as He endured His suffering of the Cross.

He had always been in relationship with the Father, from the beginning and throughout His earthly life. Genesis 1:26, Luke 3:22, Hebrews 1:3. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus submitted His will to the Father as He approached the Cross. *“Abba, Father,” He said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what You will.”* Mark 14:36. At the Cross Jesus emptied Himself of His ‘Godness’ as He became sin and took the punishment that this deserved, on behalf of all people. *Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.* Philippians 2:6-8. This *kenosis* (emptying) of Christ, is an essential aspect of the incarnation (God becoming man).

So it was that in His humanity Jesus called out to God on the Cross. *“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”* He also noticed his mother standing by, and asked John to care for her in the future. John 19:6,7.

Significantly, (and different to David) He didn’t plead to be delivered from the Cross or recognise that He needed help. Rather He willingly *“endured the Cross, scorning its shame”*. Hebrews 12:2.

E. The suffering of the forsaken one.

Many bulls have surrounded me; strong bulls of Bashan have encircled me. They gape at me with their mouths, like a raging and roaring lion. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it has melted within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue clings to my jaws; You have brought me to the dust of death. For dogs have surrounded me; the congregation of the wicked has enclosed me. They pierced my hands and my feet; I can count all my bones. They look and stare at me. They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots. v12-18.

i. Here David describes the situation he was in. He was surrounded and tormented by all-powerful enemies and believed he had no strength to resist them. He describes the enemies as bulls. *“The bull is the emblem of brutal strength, that goes and tramples down all before it.”* (Clarke). David felt completely empty and believed that he had nothing in himself that could resist the ones who were persecuting him. All of his strength and resistance had been poured out like water upon the ground; his bones were out of joint; his heart felt like wax that had melted within him, and his tongue was so dry he couldn’t speak. In this state of physical extremity and misery David believed that he was about to die. He says *“You have brought me to the dust of death”*. v15. This may refer back to the curse God pronounced upon Adam after his sin: *“For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”* Genesis 3:19. Obviously, David didn’t die in this particular crisis, as he lived to write this psalm and many others, but he may well have been close to death. He was surrounded by violent and wicked men on every side: *“For dogs have surrounded me; the assembly of the wicked has enclosed me.”* v16, and they must have got close enough to physically attack him as they pierced his hands and feet, and stole his clothing. David’s physical state had become so bad that he had to check whether any of his bones had been broken, and his appearance must have been so appalling that even the enemies stared at him in horror. This must have been a memorable crisis - even for David who seemed to go from one crisis to the next – that he would write such graphic details about it!

ii. This section contains many references that are relevant for crucifixion, and particularly for the death of Jesus on the cross. David did not know anything about crucifixion as it did not take place when he was alive, but he described the physical agony of it extremely accurately. Like David, Jesus was surrounded by many aggressive enemies. *“The priests, elders, scribes, Pharisees, rulers, and captains bellowed round the cross like wild cattle, fed in the fat and solitary pastures of Bashan, full of strength and fury; they stamped and foamed around the innocent One, and longed to gore him to death with their cruelties.”* (Spurgeon). On the cross Jesus’ life was literally poured out v14, as He became sin and suffered its awful consequences. Romans 3:23. Jesus was placed in a deliberately strained position on the cross so it would feel like *“all my bones are out of joint”* v14, and build-up of fluid around His heart would have meant that His heart would have felt like wax: *“My heart is like wax; it has melted within Me.”* v14 (John 19:34-37). Jesus suffered great thirst on the cross so it would have felt as if *“My tongue clings to My jaws.”* v15. (John 19:28). And Jesus, unlike David, didn’t just come close to death; He was plunged into *the dust of*

death v15, as He took the sting of Adam's curse on our behalf. Galatians 3:13. In His death, Jesus, the Son of David, had few sympathizers. Haters, scoffers, and mockers like dogs surrounded Him on the cross and sought to make His suffering worse. (Matthew 27:39-44, Mark 15:29-32). And *"they pierced My hands and My feet"*. v16. The Masoretic Hebrew text doesn't say *"pierced"*; it says *"as a lion."* Yet the Septuagint (Greek) translation of the Old Testament – long before the Christian era – translates it as *"pierced"*. *"This may suggest that the Masoretic text was deliberately pointed in the way it was by later Jewish scholars to avoid what otherwise would be a nearly inescapable prophecy of Jesus' crucifixion."* (Boice). David said he could *"count all my bones"* v17, while on the cross Jesus did not have any of His bones broken. In John 19:31-37 this is linked to Psalm 34:20 and possibly to the Passover Lamb. Exodus 12:46, Numbers 9:12. Then, in his crisis David said *"they look and stare at me"* while Jesus' tormentors did not allow Him the dignity of suffering in private, but placed Him in public humiliation on Golgotha, outside of Jerusalem. Matthew 27:39-44, Mark 15:29-32. *"Oh, how different is that look which the awakened sinner directs to Calvary, when faith lifts up her eye to him who agonised, and bled, and died, for the guilty!"* (Morrison, quoted in Spurgeon). Then *"they divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots."* Jesus was stripped nearly naked and soldiers gambled for His clothing at the very foot of the cross. John 19:23-24 and Matthew 27:35. They certainly wouldn't have read Psalm 22:18!! *"Unholy eyes gazed insultingly upon the Saviour's nakedness, and shocked the sacred delicacy of his holy soul. The sight of the agonizing body ought to have ensured sympathy from the throng, but it only increased their savage mirth, as they gloated their cruel eyes upon His miseries."* (Spurgeon).

What a remarkable account! Especially as Psalm 22 was written about 1000 years before the death of Jesus on the cross.

F. A plea for help.

But You, O LORD, do not be far from me; O my strength, hasten to help me! Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog. Save me from the lion's mouth and from the horns of the wild oxen! v19-21a.

i. In v11 David says that there was no-one who could help him, but now, at last, he asks the Lord for help. He repeats some of the feelings he expressed earlier, especially his helplessness in the face of the enemy's might (swords, dogs, lions, oxen), but now recognises that the Lord is His strength – the only One who can help. David seemed to believe that he could endure *anything* if the Lord was with him. This is a major change in attitude and one which continues through the rest of the psalm. Nothing is too hard for the Lord!

ii. On the cross Jesus did not ask to be delivered from the sword or that His life would be spared. *"The wrath of God was the 'sword,' which took vengeance on all men...it was the 'flaming sword,' which kept men out of paradise."* (Horne). Rather He submitted to the will of the Father and willingly took the punishment being heaped upon Him by evil men. *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* Luke 23:34. *"Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!"* Luke 23:46.

G. An answer to the forsaken one.

You have answered me. I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will praise You. You who fear the LORD, praise Him! All you descendants of Jacob, glorify Him. And fear Him, all you offspring of Israel! v21b-23.

i. After pouring out his soul in agony, David now has a glorious sense that God has answered Him. He is no longer forsaken! *"As he thus cries, the conviction that he is heard floods his soul. It is like a parting burst of sunshine at the end of a day of tempest."* (Maclaren). Even though he was still in great danger, David now knew that God was not removed from His suffering nor silent in it. He promises to acknowledge and praise the God who had delivered him, but then realises that others need to know of God's greatness should they find themselves in similar situations. His focus turns from his personal miseries to gratefulness to God and concern for others so he encourages followers of the Lord to *praise*, to *glorify*, and to *fear* the Lord. No matter what they may be going through, God is trustworthy and should be honoured. Even without an immediate deliverance from difficulty, there is immense comfort in knowing that God is there and that He is not silent in the midst of our crises.

ii. Jesus did not need to say *"You have answered Me."* The agony and victory of the cross was God's complete and final once-for-all answer! 1 Peter 3:18. This is reflected in Jesus' final announcements on the cross: *"It is finished!"* John 19:30, and *"Father, into Your hands I commend My Spirit."* Luke 23:46. These words point to a re-established sense of fellowship between Jesus and the Father, replacing the prior sense of forsakenness. Hebrews 2:12 quotes from Psalm 22:22 and links to Jesus' prayer on the night before He was crucified: *"I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it."* John 17:26. These words show Jesus' absolute determination to bring about salvation for all, regardless of the personal cost. Jesus understood that His obedient work on the cross would bring great glory to God the Father, and result in universal declaration of the greatness of His name. So, this section of Psalm 22 reflects the primary reason Jesus went to the cross: to glorify and obey His God and Father.

H. Praise for God who answers the forsaken.

For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; Nor has He hidden His face from him; But when he cried to Him, He heard. My praise shall be of You in the great assembly; I will pay my vows before those who fear Him. v24-25.

i. David now realises that God had a greater purpose for the situation he was in. God had not despised him, and He certainly had not minimised the awfulness of David's affliction. God had heard David's cries after all!! (compared to earlier in the psalm where David was convinced God was not hearing his calls for help). God had not abandoned him, so there must be some reason for his suffering that God could use for good. Sometimes affliction is automatically associated with the disfavour of God, but it not always negative and can be used by God for good effect in the lives of His people. (It is also true that affliction may come as a consequence of our actions or as discipline which can lead to our personal development). David's realisation here reflects a profound spiritual wisdom and depth, and perhaps informs a more balanced understanding of Romans 8:28: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* David's response to this realisation was to declare that he would praise God before others and that he would honour God by keeping his promises. A deep work had been done in his heart, that would be reflected in his day-to-day actions.

ii. This also make sense of Isaiah 53:10: *'Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him'*. The affliction that Jesus experienced at the Cross was not because God despised Him. Even though Jesus may have felt the Father had turned from Him (*Why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me? You do not hear,* Psalm 22:1,2) the Father certainly had not turned His face from His beloved Son. It is now clear that Jesus was afflicted as part of God's overall purpose for the redemption of mankind, and that the Father had heard Jesus' cry after all. Rather than debasing Jesus this led to His exaltation and praise among all peoples: *Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* Philippians 2:8-10.

I. Others rejoice in the God who answers the forsaken.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied; Those who seek Him will praise the LORD. Let your heart live forever! All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. v26-27.

i. If God shows such grace to David in this affliction there is hope for anyone – even the poor! God will take care of all who seek Him and who trust in Him, regardless of who they are or where they live. Anyone can have their needs satisfied by the Lord, and if they seek the Lord and trust Him they will find great joy and will then worship the Lord for His great goodness. David's affliction has now turned from a source of great despair to a source of great hope for anyone, anywhere! *"There are souls now weeping for sin and longing for a Savior who will soon find them, and then will become most hearty singers of the new song. They are coming, coming in their thousands even now. The music of praise shall be continued as long as the sun, and the glory of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. From generation to generation shall the name of the Lord be praised."* (Spurgeon).

ii. This section of Psalm 22 demonstrates another great reason why Jesus went to the cross: so that those who believe on Him could turn to the Lord and be saved. (Others reasons were to carry out the Father's will, and to make atonement for the sins of all). So even in the awful affliction that Jesus endured there was joy: *'who for the*

joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame'. Hebrews 12:2. "In that last happy interval, before He actually gave up His soul into His Father's hands, His thoughts rushed forward and found a blessed place of rest in the prospect that, as the result of His death, all the kindreds of the nations would worship before the Lord, and that by a chosen seed the Most High should be honored." (Spurgeon). "I think it is an absolutely wonderful thought and one that should move us to the most intent love for and devotion to Jesus Christ. You and I were in Jesus' thoughts at the very moment of His death. It was for you and me explicitly and for our salvation from sin that He was dying." (Boice).

J. Enduring praise for a faithful God.

For the kingdom is the LORD's, and He rules over the nations. All the prosperous of the earth shall eat and worship; all those who go down to the dust shall bow before Him, even he who cannot keep himself alive. All posterity shall serve Him. It will be recounted of the Lord to the next generation. They will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He has done this. v28-31.

i. David has now rekindled his confidence in the Lord as the One who is King above all kings and who is ruling above all others. He now sees that his afflictions are just part of God's great plan for all mankind. Someone may be in great prosperity while others may be suffering or even dying, but we are all here to serve the Lord's purposes. The Lord is so highly exalted that all must honour Him even though we may do so in different ways (e.g. while fellowshiping, worshipping, serving, declaring God's righteousness, or even as we are dying). This is such a great truth that it must be declared to all future generations, even to 'a people yet to be born.'

ii. Jesus was highly focused on bringing in the Kingdom of God – so that all people would be able to live in relationship with God as their Lord, Master and King. He could have 'kept Himself alive', but at the cross Jesus willingly laid this aside in deference to the Father's will. 'No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.' John 10:18. The work of Jesus on the cross was all-encompassing. It was for His Jewish brothers, 'My brethren', Psalm 22:22, and for Gentiles who could now be redeemed and have a part 'in the great congregation', Psalm 22:25. It was for all peoples: rich or poor, great or small, slave or free. It was also for future generations who would trust the Lord and be saved: 'to the next generation...to a people who will be born'. Psalm 22:30,31. In fact 'all posterity shall serve Him. v30. This highlights a wonderful truth – true for King David, but far more gloriously fulfilled in Jesus Christ – that none of the Forsaken One's sufferings were wasted. Every drop of that cup of agony was used to the great glory of God and the salvation of His people. "Is Christ, the great King, satisfied to settle down in a corner of the world as ruler over one scanty province?" (Spurgeon). "Our new-born nature craves for the spread of the Redeemer's kingdom, and prays for it instinctively." (Spurgeon). The faithfulness of God to the formerly Forsaken One will be told to all future generations, bringing great glory to the Lord. They will all look at what Jesus has accomplished and say 'He has done this.'

Jesus appropriated the victory of the second half of this psalm just as much as He did the agony of the first half. Because there is no object (He) for the verb in Hebrew, 'He has done it' it can equally well be translated, 'It is finished.' John 19:30. "The psalm which began with the cry of dereliction ends with the word "He has wrought it" - an announcement not far removed from our Lord's great cry, 'It is finished.'" (Kidner).

David's agony turned to a recognition of the greatness of God. Jesus' agony turned to the possibility of eternal life for all peoples. Both result in God's great glory.