

Psalm 22 - Easter Sunday

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[0 : 00] I'm going to read Psalm 22, just from verse 1 to 21.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me from the words of my groanings? Oh my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer.

And by night, but I find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted.

They trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued. In you they trusted and were not put to shame. But I am a worm and not a man.

Scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me, they mock me. They make mouths at me. They wag their heads. He trusts in the Lord. Let him deliver him.

[1 : 03] Let him rescue him, for he delights in him. Yet you are he who took me from the womb. You made me trust you at my mother's breasts. On you was I cast from birth.

And from my mother's wombs you have been my God. Be not far from me. The trouble is near. And there is none to help. Many balls encompass me.

Strong bulls of bashan surround me. They open wide their mouths at me. Like a ravening and roaring lion. I am poured out like water. And all my bones are out of joint.

My heart is like wax. It is melted within my breast. My strength is dried up like a withered hard. And my tongue sticks to my jaws.

You lay me in the dust of death. For dogs encompass me. A company of evildoers encircle me. They have pierced my hands and feet.

[2 : 06] I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them. And for my clothing they cast lots. But you, O Lord, do not be far away.

O you, my help, come quickly to my aid. Deliver my soul from the sword. My precious life from the power of the dog. Save me from the mouth of the lion.

You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen. All right, good morning.

Okay, today is Easter Sunday. This is the traditional day when Christians traditionally move from the somber tone of Good Friday to celebration. Or when we move from the fasting of Lent, if you've observed Lent and you're from that Christian tradition.

You observe that. To the feasting on chocolate and other things of all shapes and sizes. So, if that's the case, if this is a day of celebration, why such a mournful psalm?

[3 : 17] And we only read the first half of it, which is like the most mournful bit. The second half of it, if you go on and read later, you'll discover it is all about celebrating the truth of the first half being fulfilled.

It is a mournful psalm. It's actually called a lament psalm. Now, we don't kind of use that word these days. We kind of use the word blues, don't we, when we talk about songs. But it is. That's what it is.

It's like an ancient Near Eastern version of the blues. You know the story. My car broke down. I lost my job. The cat got run over. I'm sick in hospital. And my best friend's mum just died.

You know, all of those kinds of things roll into one story. Well, that's the kind of thing that we're looking at here. We're looking at a lament psalm because that is what real life is like.

And it's because it totally describes the first Easter. Lament psalms, or blues psalms if you prefer, describe life as it really is. Life isn't a TV commercial or a rom-com, sitcom or any other sort.

[4 : 18] Things just don't work out perfectly or smoothly or painlessly or easily. I remember watching a movie called Princess Bride when I was a teenager.

I don't know if any of you have seen that movie. Princess Bride is a great movie. And there's a line in it in which the lead character, Wesley, although he's actually in the mode of the dread pirate Prince Robert at the time, he says, Life is pain, princess.

Anyone who says different is selling something. Life is pain. Even as a teenager, I instinctively knew the truth of what he was saying.

And I also remember another time when it really struck home to me. And that was the first time I saw the painting called The Scream. And it's only colloquially called this. It wasn't called this by the painter. The Scream. It was painted by a man called Edvard Munch around 1895.

He's done four of them. And this is just the one of them, the one of them I find most disturbing really. And it's haunting. I'm just checking it was up there. It's haunting, isn't it?

[5 : 28] He describes his experience in the form of a painting of being suddenly caught up in the tortured pain that he saw nature being in. It was screaming.

And he was drawn into it. It became the cry of his tortured soul. And even as we look at it now, over 100 years later, it still disturbs us.

But something in it resonates too. Life is pain. Maybe not 24-7. But an endless cycle of moving through painful events.

Until we die. Something is not quite right about the world. Life is bent out of shape. It feels wrong. Death feels absolutely wrong.

Psalms 22 speaks about that kind of world. It addresses real life, warts and all. But it doesn't promise just to leave us there.

[6 : 35] It gives us a real and rock-solid hope for celebration. If you haven't got a Bible, and I am going to be working through this passage.

So if you haven't got a Bible, then there's these hardback black ones up the back there. So feel free to grab one of those. And if you do have one of those, we're on page 457. If you've got screaming fast internet, download the Crossway Bible app.

And that's got a free, ad-free version of the Bible. So look up Psalm 22 in that. The first thing I want to say about this Psalm, though, is it falls into two parts.

It has kind of two functions. One is to kind of teach us how to actually approach God when we suffer. What do we do when we suffer? Where is God when we suffer?

And then the other side of it is to show how God actually answers the cry of our hearts. Where are you when we're suffering? And gives us a reason for celebration.

[7 : 39] So let's have a look at this. Part one, where is God in suffering? Okay, the first part of Psalm 2 goes from verses 1 to 21. They're the small numbers in the Bible if you're not used to Bibles.

And it's written by a king called King David, as we've already been introduced, by Rod. And it's about his own personal experience of suffering.

It's raw and it's real and it covers a lot of what we feel when we suffer. But as we go through the Psalm, look at how, not only how David talks to God, but how David speaks to himself as well.

There's a bit of a cycle that goes on here. First, he starts off with his cry of abandonment. King David begins with a desperate cry in verse 1. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

You see the repetition of God here. It emphasizes his desperation, but the use of the word God, El, explains why. The Hebrew word for God that's used here means mighty one.

[8 : 39] In other words, God has the power to save, so why isn't he? Now, many of us will know this feeling.

Someone once said there are no atheists in the trenches. And it's kind of true, isn't it? When we're in trouble, we pray. But I think it's also accurate to say that there are no atheists, but not everyone is happy with God in the trenches either.

Some of us pray to God because we suffer and we hope for relief. Some of us rage at God. We hate him because we suffer. We hate him because we feel abandoned.

So David's cry echoes our own feeling of abandonment in our own personal suffering. When we suffer, we suffer alone.

If we acknowledge there is a God, then there's a time we feel forsaken by him. He feels so far from us. It's a sentiment that David repeats in verses 8, 11, and 19 in this passage.

[9 : 47] We cry out, but God doesn't answer. David captures that feeling of abandonment, of alonement in suffering.

And then he goes on to explain why he's so upset with God in the first place. God, where are you? You should be trustworthy.

He says in verse 3, Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. David knows God can help.

He knows God has helped countless times in miraculous ways. There's so much history to God's faithfulness that he describes God as enthroned on the praises of Israel.

Their overwhelming experience of God is that he is praiseworthy. Time and time again, God's people have called out, and God has rescued them. They trusted. God delivered.

[10 : 51] Like a good parent, or the fire brigade, or the police, the ambulance. They come when you call. They're our heroes. So where is this hero God now?

Is what David is asking. David just hangs in this intense experience of suffering, and he wonders, why isn't God showing up for me?

He feels like an outcast. He feels ashamed of where he's at. And that's the next thing that David talks about here. It's called shame. We don't always recognize the shame in suffering, but here's two ways that it plays out, just to maybe help you get a sense of how it works.

You see, there's the shame of suffering itself, to be despised. David says, I am a worm, not a man. This is how people view him. He's an outcast. If you've suffered, then you know this.

Some examples. I was a physiotherapist. I worked in hospitals. There are doctors here who can give you more gruesome stories than I can. There are nurses here who have absolutely no filters when they tell you things about what they've experienced and seen.

[11 : 58] But some examples. It took very special people to work in the burns unit of the hospital that I did my student placement in.

It took very special people to get alongside those who were in screaming agony and looked an absolute mess. Then there was the vascular ward that I worked on.

That's where all the amputations happened. The sickly smell of gangrene. You know, you don't want me to talk anymore, do you? You don't want me to give examples. You don't want me to describe the different procedures and things that they used to treat people in those circumstances.

And then there's the seemingly scarless experience of mental illness. Some of us just don't know how to sit alongside someone with depression or anxiety.

Suffering inwardly. There's a revulsion in us that causes us to physically withdraw. I'm not talking about fear of contagion here. I'm talking about how people react to us when we suffer.

[13 : 12] The shame of suffering itself in being despised. But then there's also the shame of misplaced trust in suffering. And that's one of the things that David relates here.

Suffering exposes the foundations of my life. Who or what do I trust in? And for my friends who don't trust in God, this is a real sticking point.

If God is so good, they say, if he loves me so much, then why does he let me suffer? Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why is there any suffering in the world? Is it a fault in me that I don't deserve to be helped?

That I actually deserve this? Or is it a fault in God that he isn't trustworthy after all? People look at David and they mock him.

In verse 8, they say, He trusts in the Lord. Let him deliver him. Let him rescue him, for he delights in him. These sentiments are so real to us in times of suffering.

[14 : 15] What are we actually relying on as we suffer? And if it's God, how can we? But again, David turns to what he knows of God.

It's like he's preaching the truth to himself. Again, David returns to history for answers and the refrain, But you are trustworthy, comes through. In verses 9 to 10, we read the words.

This is from David's own personal life experience. Yet you are he who took me from the womb. You made me trust you at my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth and from my mother's womb.

You have been my God. All his life, right from the very beginning, is evidence of God's care. He carries with him a personal, lifelong experience of God's faithfulness.

If God is real, then he is responsible for leaving me in my suffering. But he's responsible for all the goodness in my life too.

[15 : 21] We can't just have one or the other. And then another wave crashes over him. And he describes the experience of feeling crushed.

The trouble we face is real. Real enemies. Acute pain. Deep fears. Uncontrollable panic.

There are times when the weight of these things crush us. And David describes this kind of experience quite graphically in verses 12 to 18.

He talks about being surrounded. He's trapped in his circumstances. There is no way out for him. Pull yourself together just doesn't help when you're in this kind of situation.

He describes himself as being poured out. He is beyond his capacity to endure. Mentally, physically, emotionally. There is nothing left in the tank. He is broken by his experience.

[16 : 25] They divide my garments, he says. As he approaches death, he sees the vultures circling. There are those who want to benefit from his circumstances.

There's such a stark and honest appraisal of what it feels like to be in the depths of suffering, to be deeply and hopelessly lost in it.

What can possibly lift someone out of this pit? But you are trustworthy, his thoughts return.

Because yet, even as he realizes the depth of the pit that he's in, his perspective begins to change. In verse 19, it's not too obvious at initial reading, but in verse 19, David's prayer moves from the perspective of forsaken by God to faithful.

He says, in verse 19, But you, O Lord, notice the Lord is in capitals there. You, O Lord, do not be far off.

[17 : 32] O you, my help, come quickly to my aid. For the first time in this whole psalm, David uses the personal name of God.

When Lord is in capital letters like that, it means Yahweh, the God who promised to his people to be faithful. Before David prayed to El, the mighty one.

Now David is praying to Yahweh, the faithful one. His personal promise-keeping God. And when he does pray, he says, Do not be far off.

David is beginning to recognize that God is always there. The feeling of abandonment is not fact. God is present, and this is the answer to his cry for help.

When I suffer, I am not alone. The mighty one who can rescue me from everything is there, because he is the faithful one. And because he's the faithful one, he will rescue me.

[18 : 35] Now the answer to the question, where is God in suffering, is that God is there in suffering. But how?

What does it look like? I mean, a fully a third of psalms are lament psalms, or blues psalms. That means there was a lot of suffering going around at the time.

I received a present from the government. I turned 50 this year, and I received a present from the government that kindly reminded me that I'm getting older, and I'm falling apart.

It was a bowel cancer test kit. I'm not getting any younger. These cycles are taking their toll on me. I am wearing out.

So how will God rescue me? Is this just some hopeful thought? You know, the kind of thing you put on a fridge magnet, but really no more substantial than any other false promise out there.

[19 : 40] What can I take home that will be of any real and lasting comfort to me? Well, the reality is that David's cry was answered.

But he didn't fully experience that answer. Not the fullness of the answer. By that I mean the answer we long for, the end to all suffering.

He didn't experience that. But he got an experience of where God was going with his plan. This is a lament psalm, as I've already said, but it's also a prophetic psalm. And this, again, is something that Rod brought out really helpfully in the kids' talk.

It represents the very real experience of suffering in David's life. Don't get me wrong. It represents the very real experience of suffering in David's life.

But it doesn't describe the actual events of David's life. It describes the events of another person's life. This psalm points to Jesus.

[20 : 42] Jesus is the one who was crushed. He was surrounded by people who attacked him mercilessly. They physically broke him. Historical accounts, that's Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, amongst some of the other secular accounts of the time that actually refer to these events.

The historical accounts tell us that Jesus was brutally beaten. He was whipped to within an inch of his life. His hands and feet were pierced, as David describes in this psalm, and he was hung to die on a cross.

Crucifixion. Jesus' life was poured out. He was taken beyond his capacity to endure. And while Jesus was dying, they cast lots for his clothes.

You can read about this in Matthew 27, for example. Just as David described, though, in Psalm 22. He was crushed.

And Jesus was mocked. While on the cross, they gathered around to mock him. In his account, Matthew records their words. In chapter 27, verse 43 of his gospel, the mockers say these words.

[21 : 51] He trusts in God. Let God rescue him if he wants him. Familiar words? Friends, if you've seen The Passion by Mel Gibson, I don't know if you've seen that movie, then I hear that you've seen an approximation of what crucifixion looks like.

And to a certain extent, the power of the movie is able to draw you in to the experience. But it doesn't allow you to experience what it felt like for Jesus. Jesus would have been so badly messed up that he would have looked inhuman, like a worm, not a man, as David describes.

People would have recoiled from the sight of him. He was hung outside the city as an outcast. It was the most shameful way to die. Just as David described in this psalm.

And Jesus was forsaken. The words that Jesus cried out on the cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

As he cries those words, he identifies himself and his experience on the cross with this psalm. This was the point of Jesus' death.

[23 : 10] We think we suffer alone. Jesus suffered in our place. And separation from God is the ultimate experience of suffering. This wasn't a clean and dignified death.

You need to understand that. The witnesses, Matthew and Mark, record that Jesus died screaming in agony. It's not the way we picture it, is it, in our minds? He died screaming in agony.

Jesus is the one who was abandoned, shamed, crushed. Jesus is the one who fulfilled our heart's cry when we suffer.

He is our help. Amanda, to fully understand this, we need to understand the cause of suffering in the world. And I'm aware that some of us here will be in the middle of suffering, so I'm quite cautious about saying these things.

The words I say now, they'll help you to understand, but they may be very hard to hear. And I apologise for that if I'm speaking into a part of your life where you're really struggling to hear these things. By all means, come on and speak to me after the service if it is the case.

[24 : 17] But here's how the Bible explains things. The Bible explains creation of the world as an act of goodness. It was meant to be a place where we enjoyed God's goodness in God's presence.

There was no suffering, only blessing. But humanity, we read in Genesis 3, we chose to doubt God's goodness and chose to find a different way to rebel against God.

We made enemies of this good God. We call this sin. That's another way of describing sin. And the effect was that God withdrew his presence from us and he withdrew his blessing from the world.

Suffering is because of our sin. It's the effect of our separation from God and his goodness. That's really interesting to note that when Jesus walked the earth, that that suffering was pushed back.

Wherever he went, whoever touched him, whatever disease they had, whatever they suffered from, it ceased to exist in their bodies. He brought people back to life.

[25 : 34] He pushed back the curse in his life. But to defeat the curse of suffering, he had to choose to suffer in our place.

And by enduring what he endured on the cross, he repaired the broken relationship between us and God. and he became the means of restoring God's presence and God's blessing.

So where does that leave us now? And what does it have to do with Easter? I mean, you could be forgiven for thinking that Easter is all about chocolate Easter eggs and bunnies and hot cross buns and we're going to have some hot cross buns later.

But can I just say, just for the record, you can Google why we eat these things and you will find all kinds of explanations. The reality is, this is a spiritual explanation from a pastor, the reason why we eat chocolate Easter eggs at Christmas is because Christians like chocolate.

That's it, alright? That's all. You come up with something better tasting and we'll eat that at Easter. We'll eat that at Christmas as well.

[26 : 49] The kind of celebration that David described in his psalm is a psalm, is a celebration of feasting where all the best things in the world are brought in together and laid out on the table for everyone to eat.

It's a banquet. It's a description of a banquet. Feasting for everyone. God has heard our cry for help. He has not pulled back from us.

He has come so close to us that he got in between us and our suffering and he's taken it for us. So now we can enjoy God's presence and goodness like never before and yet still it's not quite there, is it?

It's not quite like we expect it to be. We still suffer in our bodies. We still expect to die. I've told you before, I did one of those life expectancy apps and applications on the internet and the first one I did said I would live until I was 82.

I wasn't satisfied with that so I found three more applications on the internet and did them until I got to a life expectancy of 93. I was happier with that but it still means I'm going to die. These things happen.

[28 : 03] So how is this an answer? How is Jesus an answer? Well let me suggest this. This psalm functions on two levels.

It teaches us how to respond to suffering, to communicate with God openly and honestly and repeatedly and it reminds, it teaches us to remind ourselves, to preach to ourselves that God is present in suffering.

So it teaches us how to respond to suffering at one point but it shows us God's far greater plan for suffering to show that God himself suffered in our place to end suffering and to remind us that there is a future, there is a future coming without suffering.

This time we experience now with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, God within us, this time we experience now is a time when we get to share the good news.

We get to celebrate now and draw other people into this celebration to tell them who Jesus is, to proclaim his goodness. God has shown us decisively that he is trustworthy.

[29 : 21] So we come to God in suffering and we celebrate his victory over suffering. this is why we celebrate on Easter.

So, we are going to continue by doing just that. We are going to continue celebrating in song. Someone is going to pray for us and thank God for all that he has done for us and we are going to celebrate biting hot cross buns together and no doubt you will go home and have something even more substantial to eat when you get home.

I actually meant lunch, not the chocolate Easter eggs that I know are waiting at home. But let's just pray, let's pause and pray now before we do sing and thank God for his goodness.

Father God, we acknowledge that life is challenging to say the least. There are so many different ways that suffering touches our life, whether it be the physical pain, the emotional, mental pain of loss, of our own impending death.

There are so many ways and there's such wrongness to how it feels. But Lord, we thank you for not abandoning us in this. We thank you for going completely other extreme and actually taking on this experience for us, for dealing with what we deserve for our rebellion against you and for lifting us out of it and showing us your goodness and for giving us the promise of that goodness being showered on us for eternity because of the work of your son.

[31 : 10] We thank you and praise you for these things, Lord. Amen.