

Psalm 22 – Lament & Hope

Good morning! Please open your Bibles to Psalm 22.

We want to help you see how to read these psalms for yourself. We're looking at different types of Psalms – praise, wisdom, messianic, and today we're looking at a lament psalm.

What is a lament psalm?

Psalms of lament express the pain of life, the feelings of betrayal, or the suffering associated with living in a fallen world. They convey the sense that once things were good, but now all is lost. They are often characterized by bodily expressions of grief – laying on the ground, rending clothes, gritting teeth, or other visceral, bodily signs of pain and grief. But in all of the psalms of lament, except Psalm 88, there is a turn such that the psalm ends in a word of hope – that the suffering will not have the last word.

So as we read, notice the bodily expressions of lament and the turn that happens.

Read Psalm 22

Let's pray...

Our world likes to name and label things, especially traits or phenomenon that we observe, and we like to use psychological terms.

- **Placebo effect** – fake psychological or medical treatments often lead to improvements in people's symptoms and functioning.
- **'by stander effect'** – The more people who are present at an emergency situation, the less likely it is that any one of them will help
- **Fundamental attribution error.** People tend to explain others' behavior in terms of their personal characteristics as opposed to the situation they are in. I judge your character based on what you do, but I judge myself based on my motivations and the circumstances. You're late because you're an unthoughtful person; I'm late because of traffic.

One of those phenomena that received a name in recent years is 'Toxic Positivity.' It's the idea that people or communities can be so optimistic or positive about things that

there is no room for sadness or grief or for people to be authentic and real about what they're feeling.

It's been the subject of some of the recent children's movies like *Inside Out* and *Encanto*. Bruno, for example, makes predictions about the future, but since not all of his predictions are happy – he is cast out. We don't talk about Bruno.

Signs of toxic positivity include saying things like, 'positive vibes only' or 'just don't think about it,' or even 'Hakuna Matata – which means 'no worries.' It's when a grieving person is told, "you just need to get over this" or "other people have it worse."

Too often the church has suffered from this kind of toxic positivity. Like Job's friends, we may speak when we should listen or we offer quick, trite solutions when we should instead grieve with a person. We give off the message – no real suffering allowed here.

It has been true of many churches, and probably all churches at one time or another, that truths that are sad or unpleasant to think or talk about get pushed to the side.

But friends, the Christian ought to know better. Our prayers and worship songs need to have a place for lament or sadness. That's what we find in the Psalms. In the Psalms, we hear the expression of each part of the human experience. To paraphrase John Calvin, "the Psalms are the mirror of the soul."¹ If that's true, then lament is a major part of that. More than a third of the Psalms are 'lament' psalms.

So we must have a category for lament in our lives. We must have a way to think about and process deep grief and pain. We need to be able to the question: How should we lament? Is there room for true lament in our Christian walk? Do we have a way to give voice to our deep sorrows and express our grief to God? That's what we'll see here in Psalm 22. It will help us answer this question, "How should we lament?"

We don't know the specific setting for this Psalm that led David to write these words in Psalm 22. But we do sense that it has messianic undertones. David speaks in such a way

¹ Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, [*The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 1.

that his words go beyond his situation and point forward to the one who will suffer an unjust death in the place of sinners. The New Testament writers will use this Psalm to speak about how it was clearly fulfilled at the crucifixion of Jesus.

If you look at Psalm 22 as a whole, you'll see that it's laid out in roughly two halves. The first half of lament and sorrow leading to the second half of hope and worship. Some have suggested that this Psalm forms a chiasm. Like a pyramid, with each side mirroring or developing a point given in the other half.

One other important thing to note about this Psalm is that it goes back and forth between expressions of pain and belief, of sorrow and trust. Those two realities can co-exist. We can experience pain and at the same time re-assert our belief in what we know to be true about God and His work in our lives.

Mark Vroegop of College Park Church in Indianapolis wrote a book on lament called *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy* and in it he offers this observation:

Pain + Belief = Hope

This is to say, that in our pain, we may yet believe, and in the combination of those two realities, we will find hope. Psalm 22 helps us see this. It shows us that pain and belief can coexist. And that is incredibly encouraging, because when you feel forsaken, you need to be honest about the pain but not stuck in it. You need to eclipse it with something greater. So we'll see this Psalm bounces back and forth from a focus on pain, then on belief, then back to pain, only to return to belief again. And the Psalm ends with a gloriously triumphant tone.

So we'll look at the expressions of pain given by the psalmist and then at the statements of belief, and listen for the echoes of the gospel.

The Lament

We see in this Psalm several kinds of pain and grief that humans can experience. One of my favorite stories comes from Victor Hugo's novel, turned Broadway play, turned movie called *Les Miserables*. *Les Miserables* or *Les Mis* means 'the miserable ones' and it is an emotionally compelling story. I had grown up with this idea that spiritual maturity meant not letting my emotions rule me, such that I thought having emotions was a bad

thing – it meant that I would be unstable. And God used the story of *Les Mis* and the musical soundtrack, to help me wrestle with the deep sadness that is inevitably part of life. I remember praying that God would help me feel emotions, and I remember tearing up in my car, listening to the music of the *Les Mis* soundtrack.

(It's a great soundtrack – I recommend it.)

One of the great things about the story of *Les Mis* is that it highlights many of the great causes of sadness in life. Characters experience:

- The pain of injustice
- The pain of being trapped or enslaved
- The pain of regret over past mistakes
- The pain of poverty and fear about what will happen to you
- The pain of isolation
- The pain of not being good enough
- The pain of unrequited love (not returned)
- The pain of grief losing a loved one
- The pain of a child growing up and leaving you

In our text, we don't see all of these same kinds of pain, but we do see three of them:

The Pain of Loneliness

Psalm 22:1-2

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

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

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

The Psalm begins with a strong and famous statement: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" You are *my* God, the psalmist says. This feels personal. The Hebrew word here for God is a word that means "mighty one and strength." God is God because he is powerful. And that is what makes the next word so painful. To be "forsaken" means to abandon, to depart, and to lose. It is used in the Old Testament to describe Israel's apostasy when she forsook God (see Deut. 29:24, 1 Kings 19:10), or it can refer to spiritual adultery (see Hos. 4:10). The idea is that one has broken his covenant or is acting in a way that is not right.

The psalmist is expressing his pain to God and it feels like God has abandoned him. He goes on to say my cries are going out day and night, and there is no answer. It seems like God is silent.

Why are you far away from me? Where are you God?!?

Some of you have been in this place. Maybe you're there this morning.... Your prayers seem like they're hitting the ceiling. You don't enjoy reading or meditating on God's Word. Spiritual activities have lost connection with your soul.

Maybe you're not there right now, but you know the feeling when it seems like God is far away...

When it seems like God is distant
When it seems like God is quiet
When it seems like God doesn't care

And that can leave you feeling alone. The pain of loneliness is excruciating.

In the movie *Castaway*, Tom Hanks is in a plane crash and floats up onto the shore of a deserted island and has to deal with all of the hardships of surviving while all alone. It's sad and it's rough, and he does some silly things like make a friend out of a volleyball that washes up onto shore. He paints a face on it and calls it...Wilson. And it becomes his friend. He talks to Wilson and takes him with him when he tries to take a raft off of the island. And silly as it sounds just saying it out loud here, one of the saddest parts of the whole movie, some of his worst of the suffering happens when his volleyball floats away. Why is that? Because he's then alone again...and loneliness hurts.

Psalm 22 is filled with pain, and when you read it, you cannot help but think about another moment in Biblical history: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself felt these strong emotions as He hung on the cross. In fact, the opening line of this Psalm was quoted by Jesus during the final hours of His life as He hung on the cross. As the nauseating effects of the cross were having their full effect, and as he bore the wrath of holy God, Jesus cries out, **Matthew 27:46** "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

It is a pivotal moment in the death narrative. It is a crucial moment in what we call the gospel or the “Good News.” Now just think about that with me for a moment. The greatest and most spiritually defining moment in all of human history involved the gut-wrenching statement “Why have you forsaken me?” The most hopeful, life-giving moment in the entire Bible involved a frightening human emotion – to feel abandoned.

Jesus felt these strong emotions, and He felt them in a way that we cannot really fully understand. He identifies with us in our pain and knows what it feels like to be alone. When you feel alone, remember that Jesus knows and feels and meets you in your pain and lament.

And Yet...

I want you to notice that verse three and verse nine lead off with this small but very important word “yet.” This three letter word is so important. (I was most affected by this truth this week) We sometimes talk about how important the word “but” is, since there are so many important texts that say “... but God.” However, the word “yet” is also important because, while ‘but’ indicates a contrast as if the situation has changed (I was lost in sin, but God being rich in mercy, saved me), the word “yet” is used for a parallel track. “But” seems to be when the situation has changed; “yet” is for moments when pain and belief must co-exist together.

So look at verses 3-5... **Psalm 22:3-5**

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.

Verses 3-5 talk about who God is and what He has done while he is still in his pain. So “yet” is for seasons when you are waiting for the “...but God” moments. Even though the psalmist is in trouble, he is banking on what he knows to be true.

Do you see what he’s doing? In the midst of his deep pain and his feeling of being forsaken, he is anchoring his soul to who God is and what He has done. This is why we love the Psalms! This is why we need the Word of God. They anchor us to the “yet” of who God is and what He has done. In the midst of painful seasons of silence and

moments when you feel abandoned, you fuel your belief in who God is by feasting upon the Word of God. You see the way in which God delivered His people, and you anchor your soul to what God has done in the past.

So how do we lament?

One answer is that we ought to express our belief in God's character and His works. We may not understand why God has allowed all that He has allowed, but we do trust that He is good in all that He does. Even in the pain of loneliness, Jesus never leaves us or forsakes us.

And we can remember that when we were lost in our sin, Jesus saved us. The author of the book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life and yet (at the same time, on parallel tracks) he knows what it means to suffer. And He died on a Cross at the hands of the Romans. But He did not stay dead and rose again so that now, "he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." (**Hebrews 7:25**)

Jesus experienced the wrath of God so that all who believe in Him might be freed from having to perish themselves. And I want to just ask you – has there been a time in your life when you have done that? When you have confessed your sin before a holy God and asked for forgiveness that you might be saved on the day of judgment? I urge you, friend, do that today.

If you're in Christ, this belief, even in your pain, can produce hope. Pain + Belief = Hope. If we preach this good news to our souls, if we recall to our minds the gospel, it can give life. Charles Spurgeon said, sacred memory is the flower the bees of faith visit to make honey for their present distress.²

In other words, our faith calls us back to the flower of the gospel so that we can have hope in our pain. We ought to return again and again to the flower of the gospel so that our souls can be revived when we feel the pain of loneliness.

² Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, [*The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 277.

The Pain of Abuse

Not only does the psalmist feel abandoned and alone, he feels the pain of abuse at the hands of others. He is experiencing personal attacks from people.

Psalm 22:6-8

But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.
All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;
“He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him;
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!”

His situation is made even more difficult because people are using it as an opportunity to mock him and even challenge his faith. Notice that he feels like he isn't even human any more; he is “eating dirt” like a worm. He is being mocked and insulted (“make mouths at me”). And they are challenging his belief in God, throwing his trust and faith in his face. They're saying, “If your God really loved you, you wouldn't be going through all of this...”

Some of you know this kind of pain well. Friends who you thought would be friends forever, hurt you and gossip about you and betray you. Your family members lie and steal and take advantage of you. Your spouse sins against you, abusing the vows you made and destroying your trust. This is the kind of abuse that the Psalmist is speaking about here.

This is not – everyone hates me because they're all haters or they're jealous. It's not a superficial rejection because you like the wrong sports team. This is a kind of ridicule and rejection in which you feel despised by people.

Again, the parallels to the crucifixion of Jesus are so apparent.

Isaiah 53:3

He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Matthew 27:41-44

So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, **42** “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. **43** He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” **44** And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

Jesus knows what it is like to be abused, to endure insults and reviling and mocking at the hands of the powerful and the crowds.

But notice that there’s another ‘yet’ in verse 9.

Psalm 22:9

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 my birth,
and from my mother’s womb you have been my God.
Be not far from me, for trouble is near,
and there is none to help.

In these verses, the Psalmist is recounting his personal experience with God’s goodness. It is not just that he knows what God has done in the lives of other people. He knows about God’s faithfulness on a personal level. He can look back over his own life and see the providential hand of God.

Why is he doing this? Because by looking back at God’s work in His life, He is reminding himself that God can work again. It’s what we’re doing when we sing songs like ‘Great is Thy Faithfulness’ as a church. We sing, “Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not As Thou has been Thou forever wilt be”

God is faithful. And when life becomes painful, we are helped by recounting the works of God in our own lives, even through song. Isn’t it powerful when you gather with the church and collectively sing, “It is well with my soul” knowing that some people in this church are grieving? That some are walking through a recent diagnosis or difficulty in their marriage or parenting? And yet, we sing together God, ‘you’re so good’?

How has God worked in your life?

Think back over the years to the ways that God has proven Himself faithful over and over again, and even in our pain, we can remind ourselves of what we believe to be true – it is well with my soul, great is thy faithfulness, God is so good.

The Pain of being Overwhelmed

The third and final grief that is expressed here is one that I'm sure you are familiar with at some level. The Psalmist expresses that he feels completely overwhelmed. Notice that this shows up at two levels. First, we see in verses 12-13 a picture of a man who feels trapped and outnumbered. The odds do not seem to be in his favor. The situation looks dark.

Psalm 22:12-13

Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
They open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

Bashan was a region associated with luxuriant pastures and prosperity, but it also seems to have some kind of connection to unrighteous living. Therefore, the psalmist is using the bulls of Bashan as a metaphor for unrighteous people.

(Think: the dogs from Las Vegas).

Psalm 22:14-15

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 potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

He is personally exhausted – the kind of worn out that sleep and a vacation don't touch. His body is failing him. Next, verses 16-18 bring us back to this Psalm's connection to the crucifixion. The psalmist had no idea how his experience and feelings would actually take shape in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Psalm 22:16-18

For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet—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.

One commentator writes, “Verse 18 only reinforces the extremity of his suffering, for if his enemies have his garments and clothing then he is totally within their power and they can do with him whatever they will.”³

The point here is to see the fight of faith that this psalmist is in. He is surrounded, he is being abused, he feels forsaken by God, and this has left him feeling totally overwhelmed.

But notice again what the psalmist is doing, even in these verses. He is continuing to pray, to keep trusting, to keep asking God for help. Asking for help becomes an act of great faith when you feel forsaken. The worst thing you could ever do is to stop praying, to stop seeking, and to stop pursuing God. It takes belief to ask again when you feel abandoned.

Have you ever felt this kind of overwhelming sadness? When you walk through a trial like that, sometimes all you can do is continue to pray.

It may be helpful to notice what the Psalmist does not do. He doesn't:

- try to escape or numb the pain with drugs or alcohol
- try to avoid all pain by controlling every detail of his circumstances, as if he could just work his way out of suffering
- try to dismiss the pain as if it wasn't real – “just don't think about it and get over it”
- try to avoid God and religious activity

Instead what does he do? This is where we see the turn in the Psalm...

The Hope

Look at verses 19-21.

Psalm 22:19-21

But you, O LORD, do not be far off! O you my help, come quickly to my aid!
Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog!

³ Davis, Dale Ralph. *Slogging Along in the Paths of Righteousness: Psalms 13-24*. Christian Focus Publications. Kindle Edition.

Save me from the mouth of the lion! You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!

He continues to pray. There is something about praying while in pain that keeps you trusting. In other words, you trust by praying. And you keep trusting by keep praying. In prayer you keep faith alive and strong. Prayer acknowledges our need for God.

How, then, should we lament?

1. Continue in bold prayer (v19-21)

As we've been saying, keep praying, keep asking God for help, don't give up.

2. Express your pain in community (v22-26)

In verses 22-26, the psalmist speaks about being in the congregation of his brothers and praising God. He envisions some future day when God's people will collectively praise Him because verse 24,

Psalm 22:24

For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him.

God was never truly distant. Though it seemed like His face was hidden, he was not far.

The community of God's people find strength when they lament together.

I was talking with a brother this week who has walked through some deep grief, and he told me one of the things that gave him strength was hearing stories of the sufferings of others and how God remained faithful. We find strength when we lament together and cry out to God.

How do we lament? Continue in prayer, express your pain in community, and #3...

3. Praise God in light of the bigger story (27-28)

The Psalmist now turns his eyes from his own suffering – not to dismiss them or minimize them – but to keep them in perspective. Listen to his global view here

Psalm 22:27-28

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

For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.

God remains on the throne. Our pain does not negate the absolute sovereignty of the Lord. The Psalmist here is reminding himself of the cosmic purpose of God to reconcile all things to God. In the future God will take His rightful place as the focal point of all creation. His ways are hidden now, but who He is will be evident then. So we praise God in view of the bigger story.

4. Put your hope in the Lord (29-31)

Psalm 22:29-31

All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, even the one who could not keep himself alive.

Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;

31 they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it.

Don't miss that last phrase. It is really important. Remember where we began? "Why have you forsaken me?" is how this Psalm began, a cry from a heart that wondered why God wasn't doing anything. And now what does the psalmist say? "He has done it!"

Do you hear any echo of the cross again? I sure hope you do. At the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the Father was not abandoning His Son, He was completing His plan to rescue and redeem sinners like you and me. God accomplished our redemption through the crushing of his Son. So now, we can feast, even if we die. One generation shall proclaim it to the next generation, to those not yet born – the Lord is the king who rescues us from our enemies. That's where our hope belongs.

How should we lament? How do we avoid toxic positivity?

We continue in prayer, we express our pain in community, we praise God in light of the bigger story, and we put our hope in the Lord who has accomplished our salvation.

Let us pray...

Psalm 22

TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO THE DOE OF THE DAWN. A PSALM OF DAVID.

22:1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

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

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

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

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

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

6 But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.

7 All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;

8 "He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him;
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!"

9 Yet you are he who took me from the womb;
you made me trust you at my mother's breasts.

10 On you was I cast from my birth,
and from my mother's womb you have been my God.

11 Be not far from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is none to help.

12 Many bulls encompass me;
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

13 they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.

14 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;
15 my strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

16 For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—
17 I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me;
18 they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.

19 But you, O LORD, do not be far off!
O you my help, come quickly to my aid!
20 Deliver my soul from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dog!
21 Save me from the mouth of the lion!
You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!

22 I will tell of your name to my brothers;
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,
and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
24 For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him,
but has heard, when he cried to him.

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

26 The afflicted 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 you.

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

29 All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
even the one who could not keep himself alive.

30 Posterity shall serve him;

it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;

31 they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn,
that he has done it.