

ECF 21st October 2018 Psalm 22 Faith in Times of Suffering

“Suffering is everywhere, unavoidable, and its scope often overwhelms.” So wrote Tim Keller in the introduction to one of his books. He went on to say that “If you spend one hour reading this book, more than 5 children throughout the world will have died from abuse and violence during that time. If you give the entire day to reading, more than 100 children will have died violently.

But this is, of course, only one of innumerable forms and modes of suffering. Thousands die from traffic accidents or cancer every hour, and hundreds of thousands learn that their loved ones are suddenly gone. That is comparable to the population of a small city being swept away every day, leaving families and friends devastated in the wake.”

It is a great way to start a book, but it is a shocking reality that is all too clear. And for many people it is like a road-block to believing in a good, all-powerful and all-knowing God. The suffering in the world is one of the most common reasons people give for rejecting the God of the Bible.

And yet, the Bible isn't silent on this issue. It doesn't try and hide from the uncomfortable reality. It doesn't run from the challenge that pain and loss presents.

And I think that's especially true when it comes to the psalms. Many of them face up to this reality head on, and encourage us not to walk away from trusting in God because of suffering, but instead to express faith even in times of intense suffering. One of those psalms is Psalm 22:

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

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

²O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent.

³Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the praise of Israel.

⁴In you our fathers put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.

⁵They cried to you and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not disappointed.

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

⁷All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:

⁸“He trusts in the Lord;
let the Lord rescue him.

Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him.”

⁹Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you
even at my mother's breast.

¹⁰From birth I was cast upon you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.

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

¹²Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.

¹³Roaring lions tearing their prey
open their mouths wide against me.

¹⁴I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.

My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me.

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

¹⁶Dogs have surrounded me;

a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced my hands and my feet.

¹⁷ I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me.

¹⁸ They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing.

¹⁹ But you, O Lord, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me.

²⁰ Deliver my life from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dogs.

²¹ Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

²² I will declare your name to my brothers;
in the congregation I will praise you.

²³ You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honour him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!

²⁴ For he has not despised or disdained
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.

²⁵ From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;
before those who fear you will I fulfil my vows.

²⁶ The poor will eat and be satisfied;
they who seek the Lord will praise him—
may your hearts live for ever!

²⁷ All the ends of the earth
will remember and turn to the Lord,
and all the families of the nations
will bow down before him,

²⁸ for dominion belongs to the Lord
and he rules over the nations.

²⁹ All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—
those who cannot keep themselves alive.

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

³¹ They will proclaim his righteousness
to a people yet unborn—
for he has done it.”

1. David's Suffering

This psalm is a powerful expression of David's honest and sincere faith in the middle of an incredibly difficult time in his life. We don't know what his circumstances were when he wrote it. However, he clearly was struggling with intense physical and emotional pain and with ridicule from his enemies and apparent silence from God despite his constant cries for help.

That's why he started this psalm with these anguished questions:

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

Why are you so far from saving me?” Psalm 22:1

And yet, this psalm also contains amazing declarations of David's faith in God. He celebrated God's faithfulness in the past and his presence with him throughout his life. He expressed his confidence that God had heard his prayer. And he concluded his psalm with an amazing declaration of God's goodness and his glorious rule over the nations. **“All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord.”** Psalm 22:27

2. Christ's Suffering

But I'm sure that for many of us, when we read this psalm, we don't stay thinking of David's faith in his suffering for long. That's because this psalm is one the most amazing prophecies of the suffering of the ultimate anointed one, Jesus Christ himself.

a) Pain of Crucifixion

David wrote this long before crucifixion was invented as a cruel and barbaric form of execution. And yet, he so powerfully points to what Jesus suffered when he was on the cross:

- His physical exhaustion: *"I am poured out like water... My strength is dried up like a potsherd."* (like a piece of broken pottery) Psalm 22:14, 15.
- His desperate thirst from dehydration: *"My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth."* Psalm 22:15
- The dislocation of his bones as he hung exposed on the cross: *"All my bones are out of joint... I can count all my bones."* Psalm 22:14, 17
- The Roman soldiers gambling for his clothing: *"They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."* Psalm 22:18
- And most impactful of all, his hands and feet being nailed to the cross: *"They have pierced my hands and my feet."* Psalm 22:16

b) Mocked by the crowd

But that is not all. David also wrote about how the crowds would mock Jesus as he hung on the cross.

"All who see me mock me;

they hurl insults, shaking their heads:

⁸*"He trusts in the Lord;*

let the Lord rescue him.

Let him deliver him,

since he delights in him." Psalm 22:7-8

And using the power of metaphor, he described the crowds as they vented their hatred of Jesus by verbally abusing him:

"Many bulls surround me;

strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.

¹³*Roaring lions tearing their prey*

open their mouths wide against me...

Dogs have surrounded me;

a band of evil men has encircled me." Psalm 22:12, 13, 16

c) Cry from the cross

But David's prophesy doesn't only point the horror of the cross – but also to its deeper meaning. Jesus made this so clear for us by quoting v1 of this psalm from the cross. *"And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*" Mark 15:34

From midday until 3 pm, the whole land was covered in a supernatural darkness. During those 3 hours, Jesus experienced unimaginable horror. The darkness hid from view what Jesus experienced through these terrible hours – but this cry at the end, revealed what was happening.

I don't think we'll ever be able to explain it fully, but in that complete darkness, isolated from everyone, even his own Father, Jesus took upon himself our sin. He was made sin for us. He paid the price that we deserved. He was punished in our place: *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* 2 Corinthians 5:21

So Jesus didn't cry out these words from Psalm 22 because in his suffering he mistakenly thought God had abandoned him. Instead he cried out these words, because he was enduring the separation from his Father that we deserved because of our sin! He died, so that we could be forgiven, so that we could be saved.

d) His Ultimate Conquest

And that is why this psalm can end so triumphantly. Jesus' death was not a disastrous tragedy, but a glorious victory over sin and death and Satan. And so David wrote: *"He has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one."* Psalm 22:24.

Jesus was not protected from the pain and suffering of death. Instead, his suffering was accepted by God as sufficient payment for our sins, and so God raised him from the dead, declaring his true identity and that the way of salvation was now open through faith in Jesus.

And so as a result of what Jesus went through on the cross, the good news can be declared that: *"The poor will eat and be*

satisfied; they who seek the Lord will praise him.” Psalm 22:26

And God’s international kingdom will continue to grow as

“All the ends of the earth
will remember and turn to the Lord,
and all the families of the nations
will bow down before him.” Psalm 22:27

And people in the future will celebrate the victory of Jesus on the cross:

“Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord.
³¹They will proclaim his righteousness
to a people yet unborn—
for he has done it.” Psalm 22:30-31

And this is what we’ve done this morning, as people from a number of different nations and backgrounds, we’ve come together to praise Jesus, our Suffering Saviour and Risen Lord!

3. Our Suffering

But this psalm doesn’t only help us to understand the suffering David or of Jesus suffering. It can also help us to respond in faith in our suffering.

a) God is faithful to his people

This psalm declares that God is faithful to his people. David wrote: “In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.” Psalm 22:4

i) But sometimes God’s people can feel abandoned

And yet, it also declares that sometimes God’s people can feel abandoned. David was dedicated to God all his life: “From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother’s womb you have been my God.” Psalm 22:10. He had not wandered away. He had not fallen into sin or unbelief. He had faithfully trusted in his God.

And yet, when he wrote this psalm, he felt completely abandoned by God: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Psalm 22:1

And this feeling was so intense, that David felt less than a human being: “But I am a worm and not a man.” Psalm 22:6
God’s love gave dignity and value to others. But David’s suffering made him feel worthless and insignificant.

Of course this is not the complete story of this psalm. David got to the place where he could express his faith and confidence in God.

And we know that v1 is not the complete story of our lives. Because Jesus took upon himself our sin, and was punished for our iniquities, experiencing the separation from God that we deserved, we can be sure that as nothing and no-one can ever separate us from the love of God. In Hebrews 13:5, God promises us, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

But this feeling of abandonment for David was real and intense and painful. And sometimes, through no fault of our own, we can feel forsaken by God. We can feel distant from him.

And so this psalm tells us that if we feel like this, then it is ok. We don’t need to panic. We don’t need to conclude that we’ve fallen outside of God’s family. God is faithful to his people, but sometimes God’s people can feel abandoned.

b) God may feel distant

But that’s not all. David clearly felt as if God was far from him. “Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?” Psalm 22:1
God felt distant, uncaring, uninterested in his difficulties and struggles.

i) But we can still cry out to him!

But that didn’t stop David from crying out to him, because of course, this psalm is written as a prayer to God. And throughout this psalm, David pleaded with God for help. For example: “Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no-one to help.” Psalm 22:11

And “But you, O Lord, be not far off; O my Strength, come quickly to help me.” Psalm 22:19.

So although it sometimes might feel as if God is distant from us, we can still respond in faith and cry out to God for help. Effective prayer does not depend on our feelings or emotions. We don't need to feel God's presence, in order to come to him with our struggles.

Instead, we can stand in faith on the promise of his love and his commitment to his people. As Peter tells us to “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” 1 Peter 5:7

That doesn't mean that God will always answer in a way or time that we expect. David said: “O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer.” Psalm 22:2 He was faithfully bringing his struggles to God, but God did not immediately answer as he wanted.

But it does mean that God will always listen and respond in his perfect time. David could point forward in this psalm to God's ultimate response. He could declare: “He has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.” Psalm 22:24 In times of suffering, God may feel distant, but we can still cry out to him!

c) God may let his people suffer

Finally, this psalm shows that God may let his people suffer. David was God's chosen king and yet he suffered intensely. Jesus was God's Son, and yet he suffered more than anyone else. And so we as the chosen children of God, should not be surprised if we too go through times of suffering.

In fact Peter said, “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” 1 Peter 2:21 And so our suffering doesn't indicate that we are far from God, but instead it is simply part of what it means to be followers of Jesus.

John Stott said, “If the first mark of a true and living church is love, the second is suffering. The one is naturally consequent on the other. A willingness to suffer proves the genuineness of love.”

i) But God is Working For Our Good

But this psalm doesn't only show that God allows suffering in our lives – it also shows that in this suffering God is working for our good.

Sometimes, God's purpose for good becomes really clear. In Jesus' life, we know that the suffering described here has transformed our lives, bringing forgiveness and love and joy to our hearts, not only for now, but for all eternity.

As Isaiah wrote in his prophecy:

“He was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.” Isaiah 53:5

In David's life, God's purpose in his suffering is not so clear. However, it did perhaps lead to a deeper recognition of his need for God, a deeper understanding of God's power to rescue and a deeper commitment to praise God in the presence of others: “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you.” Psalm 22:22 And, of course, out of that suffering, also came this amazing psalm that has been an inspiration to others.

And in our lives, we might sometimes be able to see God bring good out of our suffering, but often we will just need to keep trusting in his promise that “In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28

If we have put our faith in Jesus, then we can rest in the knowledge that God is always working for our good, even in our most difficult times. And so with Paul we can rejoice that “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” 2 Corinthians 4:17

Conclusion

So suffering doesn't need to destroy our trust in God. Instead we can express faith in times of suffering because:

- God is faithful to his people, even if we feel abandoned.
- God may feel distant, but we can still cry out to him!

- God may let his people suffer, but he is working for our good and for his glory.

And we can know that reality because on the cross, Jesus suffered for us:

- He was punished, so that we could be forgiven.
- He was rejected, so that we could be accepted.
- He was forsaken by God, so that we can know that even in the darkest moment, we are never alone.

Andrew Burt
Enniscorthy Christian Fellowship
October 21st 2018