

When We Feel Forsaken – Psalm 22

Series: Psalms of Praise

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Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 22, John 1.1-5

In 1906, a man was born into a wealthy family in Berlin with a rich church history. His name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and because of what he did throughout the rise of Hitler and World War 2, he would become one of the most popular theologians of the last century.

He wrote a book in the 30's called "The Cost of Discipleship". Bonhoeffer's continual push was for all Christians to take God seriously. To not accept a cheap grace that says "I am free to do what I like because Jesus died for me", but a costly grace that says "Jesus has given his life for me, so I should give my life for him".

It is because of this attitude that when Hitler began his rise to power, he was extremely distressed. Many of his colleagues either fled the country, left their positions as clergy, or became part of the Riechskirche (the Nazi approved church). He was labelled a radical for calling Hitler Verfuhrer (mis-leader) and was continually slandered for his refusal to support anti-Jewish sentiment.

At multiple points throughout his life, he had to hide in his home country. He also had to flee it at times and had to miss his home deeply. When he was finally caught, he was taken away from his fiancé and spent the remainder of the war in prison.

We look at what Bonhoeffer went through and the suffering that he put himself through for being a Christian, and we could ask ourselves "where was God?".

There may come a time when we look at our own lives and say "Where are you God?"

We don't want to feel alone, like no one is out there. When we suffer, we don't want to feel abandoned.

So, a question we can ask ourselves in the face of suffering is, "how should I respond?".

Today we are looking at a very famous psalm. This psalm speaks into that pain of abandonment and shows that there is another side to that feeling. We are shown that in the end, God does not abandon his people. And how does it show it? well...

Psalm 22 shows us that suffering will happen, but in the end, God will show that he has not abandoned his people.

So, point number 1, suffering happens. We are introduced to the psalm with the line "A psalm of David". David was an ancient King who ruled over God's people and was promised a kingdom that his family would lead forever. David was blessed by God and had a close relationship with him. Out of all the people in Israel, David was the closest to God. And yet the Psalm begins with "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?". This is important to see because it shows that David's suffering is unexpected. We could even say that it is unjust. The Psalm then goes on to say how unjust it is.

We see in the Psalm from verses 1 - 5 that the kind of suffering that David is going through is being denied what was promised. He exclaims “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” not just by itself, but in the knowledge that God had not abandoned his people, Israel. They trusted God, and they were saved. Yet here he is crying out, and it’s as if no one is listening.

Then we see David cast a very poor view of himself, “A worm and not a man” as he begins from verses 6-8. He says this about himself because that is what he is treated like. People mock him because he trusts the Lord. Yet this is the only behaviour he knows. As he says in verses 9 - 11, He was made to follow the Lord. From the beginning of his life, he has been trusting the Lord, because that is what he is supposed to do.

So we can understand why David may be feeling betrayed and abandoned. A summary of what he says from verses 12 - 18 is “I am surrounded by danger. I am spent. I am thirsty. I feel Dead. I am exposed. I am mocked. I am abused.” But these are not the things that are truly upsetting David, not totally. The true thing which grips at his heart is “Lord, be not far off”. His situation is making him think that he is alone. Of course, David would call out for God’s deliverance.

And so, what does the first part of this psalm teach us? Something greatly liberating for us.

It is a common and right response to question whether God is near. We should never think that we can’t think or say this, because David, the King of Israel, said it. We are not abandoning God when we ask the question of whether he has abandoned us. It was an experience for David, and it can be our experience too.

And then further, it shows that it is right to ask him to be closer. When we are in suffering and it doesn’t feel like God is close, we are not bothering God when we ask “God, be not far from me”.

Suffering happens, and it is unjust at times. It happens to when its least expected, and it will happen even to those who do the right thing, and so we can understand when we ask the question “Why should I keep trusting God?”.

And sometimes people stop there. They could continue to stay in that place of feeling abandoned, but is that where the Bible encourages us to stay? Well let’s go back to Bonhoeffer, a man locked away in prison, away from comfort, away from his family and friends. It would make sense for a man in this situation to heavily question his faith, and even leave it behind. But his letters from prison show that this is not the case. In fact, Bonhoeffer continues to live as an enthusiastic Christian.

He wrote Letters from prison, continuing to encourage people to think further about their trust in God. There was one prison guard who was so impacted by his trust in God that he tried to free Bonhoeffer and escape with him. Bonhoeffer’s belief caused him to not just begrudgingly trust God, waiting for his payday, but he lived and acted as if he had already received it. It seemed as if nothing could touch Bonhoeffer, not even the Third Reich.

But why? How? Well, we see that in the next part of Psalm 22 a similar reaction from David. In Verse 22 of all places, we see a change take place. David’s trust is proved right, he is vindicated. David moves from this place of confusion about where God is, to this clarity that

God is near. As he says in verse 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”.

In verse 25, David goes on to serve the lord in the assembly, a phrase used to describe the gathering of God’s people.

But more than that, from verse 26 – 29, God’s provided vindication will see all people praise God. The poor, the seekers, the whole earth, all families and nations. David sees God’s vision of everyone praising him. He even sees the rich praising God, and the dying.

But more than that, in verses 30 and 31, David sees that future generations will serve God. This vindication provided for David is not just current, but forever in his mind. David sees people long beyond his time praising and worshiping God.

We see that David’s prayer, in the end is answered. God vindicates David and shows that no matter what he is going through, God had not left him behind. David’s trust was well placed.

Once again, we have this liberating sentiment. Our suffering does not define whether God is near or far. The suffering of the afflicted one is not out of sight for God. We are not told that David is released from his suffering, it is quite possible that the same dangers from earlier on are still present in his life.

But David says God has heard his cries for help. He knows that when everyone around him had abandoned him, God had not. We need to know this, especially when we are going through tough times, that our suffering is not the sign that God has left us behind. We may have thought that the line “God has not forgotten the afflicted one” meant that the afflicted one had been removed from suffering, when in reality, David is also talking about the one in suffering, that they are the one that hasn’t been forgotten. When we are going through immense suffering, we can know that God is with us, in our immense suffering.

And what can our reaction be? Praise. The knowledge that God has heard our cry for help will lead us to acknowledge the one who has acknowledged us. Our vindication will lead us to praise and worship our vindicator, even when others may say of our suffering “where is God?”.

God will vindicate those who trust him. He will show that he has not forgotten the afflicted one, and that because of this vindication, everyone, in all time, will praise God.

But we don’t know what God showed David to prove this. He had his sign which left him vindicated. But how do we know? How can we know that we should trust God? Where is our vindication?

Well, this is when we jump from the Psalms to the Gospels. You may have even noticed that this story has been told before. The suffering king, mocked by onlookers, seemingly abandoned by God as he cries “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani”, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”. Jesus shares in and is predicted by the suffering of David.

Israel was promised a king, one who would remove them from their own suffering. But here he came, and they nailed him to a cross, a sign the Jewish people interpreted as a cursed image. This was not supposed to happen. In fact, the Gospels show that the mockers are those who are part of the assembly. The mockers of God’s chosen king is Israel.

And this all happened because Jesus trusted God. In fact, he entered suffering out of his obedience to God. His suffering was real, and painful, and necessary.

And what does this make Jesus say? “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”. We see that his experience is labelled out in Psalm 22, Long before he arrived on the historical scene. We can’t help but hear Jesus when the words of psalm 22 are read to us.

Mark 15:1-37

Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

“Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate.

“You have said so,” Jesus replied.

The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.”

But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

“Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate, knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

“What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them.

“Crucify him!” they shouted.

“Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, “Hail, king of the Jews!” Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.

They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!" In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah."

Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said.

With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

There are many reasons why Jesus called to mind the words of psalm 22.

But we do know that he really said it. And he had every reason to really say it. Jesus felt abandoned by God. God had turned his face away from Jesus because God had taken on our Sin. Jesus is shown to have been abandoned by God.

The Bible shows us that Jesus truly knows our suffering. We don't have time to discuss how gruesome crucifixion was. But it can be said that if we are going through immense physical, mental, or spiritual suffering, God knows exactly what we are going through. God understands when we cry out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?".

But the story of Jesus doesn't end there. He suffers like us, and he died like us. But God showed that he is with us in our suffering, and that it will end. But God did not abandon his Messiah to the grave, nor let his body see decay (cf. Acts 2.31 And Psalm 16.10). Jesus entrusted himself to the Father, even to death, and God vindicated his obedience by raising him from the dead. Now as we trust in Christ, we share in his risen life. His resurrection is the pledge and guarantee of God's love for us. (cf. Paul's argument in Romans 5.12-19) Because he died in our place and was raised to life for us, we can know that God will not forsake us or abandon us (cf. Hebrews 13.5) And so Paul can say in Romans 8 – nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord – not even the experience of suffering. Indeed he is close to us in our suffering. His presence transforms our suffering. Suffering becomes a way in which we mysteriously share in the life of Christ. It is a stepping stone to glory (cf. Romans 8.17).

Bonhoeffer reflects on this truth in this way "Christ is not gloriously transported from earth into heaven. He must instead go to the cross. And precisely there, where the cross stands, the resurrection is near. Precisely here, where all lose faith in God, where all despair about the power of God, God is fully there, and Christ is alive and near."

Jesus is the reason for the future hope that David sees. When Jesus went through that experience of suffering, and then rose to new life, he showed the experience available for all mankind. The suffering experience is the human experience, and so Jesus's vindication is the human promise, that God will not abandon us again.

And this promise goes forward. It is a promise that was shared 2000 years ago, and is still being shared today, as the hope of the world that everyone can trust in. We are moved to praise Jesus forever because he shows himself to be our vindicator.

The Bible reveals that our suffering will end. But we also need to remember when it will end. The Bible story shows us that Jesus' experience was not just a momentary suffering, but suffering till death. And so our experience maybe the same, we may not know the comfort we wish to in this world while following God. But in Jesus we can see that when we are taken with him to new life, we will truly have his peace. In Jesus and his rising to life we see that God has not forgotten the afflicted one.

We asked the question at the beginning of the sermon, how should we respond in suffering. Well, the Bible story shows that We should trust Jesus, through unjust suffering, because of the vindication we see in him.

But let's take a moment to make clear what we haven't been shown.

Just because we now know that suffering will end, does not mean that this life will get any easier. As David and Jesus experienced, they struggled and suffered much in their life, and they were the closest people to God.

And we have not been shown that suffering will start when we choose not to follow Jesus. In fact, trusting God at times will put ourselves in a position that will mean we are vulnerable to suffering.

The promise the Bible makes is that despite all that suffering, God proves himself to be trustworthy. God proves through Jesus, that God is always present with us. So let us walk away from this passage looking to Jesus' example of trust, trusting him when he says he will not abandon us again, and praising him with confidence among those who may encourage us to think otherwise.

Bonhoeffer knew these truths. This was the reason that he continued to live as a Christian even when it seemed God had taken a break on the world. He saw a future where the people of God were vindicated, and he saw that in Jesus. And he lived with that truth right up until his execution in 1945, just weeks before the end of the war. But Bonhoeffer has been vindicated, even in this life time. His work goes around the globe encouraging Christians in all stages of life. And all those who opposed him have now been put to shame.

And so we can follow Jesus in the way Bonhoeffer did. We can enthusiastically praise and serve God with David, with Bonhoeffer, even when things are really tough, because when we look at Jesus, we say with joy "He has done it".