

My God, My God, Why have you Forsaken Me? - Disappointment and Lament

Series: Prayer

Date: 10 May 2026, 5th Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 31, Romans 5.1-8, Mark 14.32-40

We're in the middle of a sermon series on Prayer. Last week we looked at Jesus' promise, "Ask and it will be given to you." But we left a big question hanging. What happens when God doesn't answer our prayers?

Some years ago a dear friend whom I've known since childhood had a son who was born with a hole in his heart. We prayed for him every day. He was a beautiful happy little boy. But things were tough. He was in and out of hospital. One day a few weeks before his 2nd birthday we got a call. He was going in for surgery and they weren't sure how he would go. I was praying for God to protect him and heal him. His family were praying. Lots of friends were praying. His church was praying. But he died in theatre. We were all devastated. I don't think I've ever cried as much as I did at the cemetery as his little casket was lowered into the grave. You can't help but ask God why? Why didn't you answer our prayers? Why did you have to take him?

Sooner or later in life we're going to face situations where we pray for something, where there is something we long for with all our heart and God says no. Where he seems silent. Where it feels like we've been forsaken. In his book *A Praying Life*, Paul Miller describes these situations as being in the desert.¹ The desert is where there is a yawning gap between our hopes and the reality of our situation. Maybe there's a gap between the promises of God and what we're experiencing. What do we do with these experiences? How do we pray, even here?

That's our theme for today. Suffering is one of the biggest questions everyone faces in life. If God is all loving and all powerful, why is there suffering? It's not just a question for the Christian faith. Every religion and every worldview has to give some answer to this because it's something we all face as human beings. We'll touch on that question, but I'm not going to give a satisfactory answer to that question today, if there even is one. But we're asking how do we pray when we're in the valley, when we face disappointment, grief, when God is silent? I've called the sermon "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" which is not only what Jesus says on the cross, but also the opening lines of Psalm 22. And that's what

¹ Paul E. Millar, *A Praying Life*, NavPress, 2017: 162-164

we're going to do today. We'll look at how both Jesus and the Psalms show us how to pray when it feels like God has forsaken us.

Praying with Jesus in the Darkness

Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane is a moment where Jesus cries out to God, but receives the answer no. We are invited with the disciples into an incredibly intimate moment and as we watch Jesus pray he teaches us how to pray. So let's have a look at Mark 14 together.

³² They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.'³³ He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. ³⁴ 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,' he said to them. 'Stay here and keep watch.'

³⁵ Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. ³⁶ '*Abba*, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.'

The first thing we notice is that Jesus is vulnerable with his friends. He invites Peter, James and John to go with him, and he opens his heart to them: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." When we're going through a situation of suffering or sorrow, we need not do this alone. We can share with friends who can accompany us even if they don't understand the full extent of what is going on. This can be a powerful ministry. Proverbs 17.17 says, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity." And Romans 12 calls us to "rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn."²

But there is a reality that I am the only one who experiences my life. My interior life is only accessible to others as much as I share with them, and sometimes it's hard to put into words what is going on. But Jesus shows us even when others are not able to enter in, we are not alone. God is there. So he turns to God in prayer. He pours out his heart to God.

'Abba, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.'

There are three things we notice in Jesus' prayer.

² Romans 12.15

First, Jesus' prayer is grounded in God's love and power. He calls upon God as *Abba*, Father, that term of intimacy, recalling the Father's eternal love for him as his Son. As we've seen throughout this series, as God's children, adopted by grace, we share in Jesus' own relationship with the Father. He loves us as he loves his Son. And Jesus' knows God's power - "everything is possible for you."

Second, Jesus asks God with radical honesty. "Take this cup from me." The cup is the cup of God's judgement upon the sin of the world. Jesus knows that it has always been the Father's plan that he should drink this cup. He knows the physical suffering and spiritual anguish that he is about to endure. He doesn't want to go through that. None of us do when faced with physical and spiritual trials. So he asks God if there was any other possible way for his will to save humanity to be accomplished. Jesus here shows that when faced with physical suffering or spiritual anguish we too can ask God to take this from us.

Third, and most challenging for us, Jesus chooses to trust his Father and surrender to his will. So he finishes his prayer, "Yet not what I will, but what you will." It's what Jesus teaches us to pray in the Lord's prayer - "Your will be done on earth as in heaven." Unlike Jesus who knew exactly what his suffering would accomplish, when we are faced with suffering we often don't know what God wants to bring about through this. But we can still choose to trust God and to say, "your will be done", even in the darkness. Even if it may be that God will answer our prayer with "no" and that we will have a grave trial to endure.

But there God has some words of comfort for us even as we go through suffering.

First Jesus says, "Surely I am with you always". And we read in Hebrews the promise given to Joshua in the Old Testament being repeated to us in Christ: God says, "never will I leave you or forsake you."³ Indeed, the suffering Jesus endured, even entering into the Godforsakeness of our sinful human condition, means that there is now nothing that can separate us from the love of God. He will be with us, even when the darkness seems overwhelming.

Second, there is a strange alchemy in our suffering. In 1 Peter 4 we read, "Rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."⁴ As Christ has suffered for us, so in a strange way, our suffering can become a participating in the sufferings of Christ. Now this is especially so in the context of suffering for the sake of Christ in terms of persecution. But Christ is with us in all suffering, and so

³ Matthew 28.20, Joshua 1.5, Hebrews 13.5

⁴ 1 Peter 4.13, cf. Romans 8.17

suffering can become an occasion for him to draw near to us and for us to experience his presence. In Psalm 34 we read, “The Lord is close to the broken hearted, and saves those crushed in spirit.”⁵

Third, God uses suffering to refine us and grow us to be more like Jesus. So we read in Romans 5:

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

As we trust God through suffering, God grows us to be more like Jesus.

Finally, persevering through suffering helps grow in us hope. Suffering reminds us that this world is not the end. There is a day coming when Christ will make all things new and we long for that day. I’m always reminded of Frodo in the Lord of the Rings. After Sauron has been defeated and the hobbits are safe back in the Shire and everything is at peace, a shadow still of the old troubles comes over Frodo. He says to Sam, “I am wounded. It will never really heal.” And it’s only afterwards that Sam realises his melancholy was on the anniversary of being stabbed with the Nazgul blade. Live long enough and you will accumulate the wounds of this world. But we look forward in hope for the day when all things will be made whole, even while we suffer.

When Jesus returns to Peter, James and John he finds them asleep and says to them,

‘Are you asleep? Couldn’t you keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.’⁶

When we are in the darkness and banging on the closed door of heaven, our temptation is to fall into despair. Jesus tells us to watch and pray. We’ve seen that Jesus is with us as we pray in the darkness, but we have another resource to help us pray in the darkness and that is the Psalms.

Praying the Psalms in the Darkness

The Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible. They express the full range of human emotion and experience. Three of the 7 words of Christ on the cross are direct quotes from the Psalms. When he was in that excruciating squeeze, psalms of lament are what came out. We’ve seen already, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is the opening line of

⁵ Psalm 34.18

⁶ Mark 14.37-38

Psalm 22. And from our reading today, Psalm 31, Jesus says, “into your hands I commit my spirit.”⁷ If our Lord himself found the Psalms gave him words to pray when under great stress and agony, then so may we too. There’s so much to say about lament. It’s a neglected mode of prayer and song in our public worship, but about 40% of the psalms are laments.

A book I’ve found really helpful on this subject is *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy* by Mark Vroegop.⁸ Drawing on his work, I want to answer briefly 2 questions that will help orient us to using the psalms to pray in the darkness. Why Lament? And How to Lament? We’ll use Psalm 31 as our example for how this works.

Why lament?

Lament gives us a language for loss. David begins the Psalm with a plea to God, “In you Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame, deliver me in your righteousness.” But in the middle of the psalm we see how he is really feeling. Verse 9.

“Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress: my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and body with grief. My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning, my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak.” This is language that gives voice to the pain in our hearts.

Lament is a solution to silence. We can be afraid or refuse to come to God with our struggles in prayer. Maybe we’re ashamed, or afraid we’ll be rejected because we’re so angry or we’re doubting or bitter. Our pain can make us stop praying. But lament opens the crack to talk to God again, even if it’s messy.

Lament is a category for complaints. Sometimes we think that to pray “hallowed be your name” means our prayers have to be sanitised and wholly in line with God’s will, and we don’t pray until they are. Lament tells us it’s ok to complain to God. He’s big enough to hear our hurts and pain. David says, “I hate those who cling to idols” (6), and “Let me not be put to shame Lord, for I have cried out to you; but let the wicked be put to shame and be silent in the realm of the dead.” (17) That is not a nice meek and mild prayer! But it’s there in God’s word for us to pray.

Lament gives us a framework for feelings. Lament validates our feelings, but puts them in a God centred structure. Our feelings are real, but they are not the ultimate truth. God is. And without reference to him our feelings can make us self-enclosed, self-centred and cut off

⁷ Psalm 31.5, Luke 23.46

⁸ Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, Crossway, 2019

from others or from God speaking truth in our situation. This is one of the spiritual dangers when we face deep sadness. In this Psalm David is acutely aware of the attacks of those around him. "I hear many whispering, "Terror on every side!" They conspire against me and plot to take my life." (13) But he is able to put his feelings in the context of God's care for him. "In my alarm I said, "I am cut off from your sight!" Yet you heard my cry for mercy when I called to you for help." (22). And for all who take refuge in God he says, "In the shelter of your presence you hide them from all human intrigues; you keep them safe in your dwelling from accusing tongues." (20)

Lament is a process for our pain. Through lament we are invited to turn to God, to lay our complaints before him, ask for his help and choose to trust him. Lament allows us to voice and pain and walk through it with God. "I am forgotten as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery." (12)

Lament is a way to worship. Worship is not only praise and happy emotion. To cry out to God in our grief and pain is some of the deepest worship we can offer. And so on the cross Jesus says, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." And the verse concludes, "Deliver me, Lord, my faithful God." (5)

How to lament

How then should we lament in the darkness? The Psalms are our guide and I would encourage you to read a Psalm or two each day. If you've got a prayer book, this has a guide to reading all the Psalms each month. Personally I've found this very helpful in my prayer life.

Mark Vroegop suggests that there are 4 elements in lament. We've seen them all in this psalm. They don't necessarily go in order. Our prayers are messy in pain and so are psalms of lament. It's why we've jumped around a bit in Psalm 31! But psalms of lament touch on these 4 elements. And you'll notice they are very similar to Jesus' own prayer in Gethsemane.

- TURNING to God in Prayer. So David prays, "Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue; be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me." (2)
- Bringing our COMPLAINTS to God. Verse 11: "Because of all my enemies, I am the utter contempt of my neighbours, and an object of dread to my closest friends - those who see me on the street flee from me." The implied question to God is "Why?! Why is this happening to me? What are you doing God?"
- ASKING boldly for him to act. Verse 16: "Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love. Let me not be put to shame Lord, for I have cried out to you."

- Choosing to TRUST. Verse 14: “But I trust in you, Lord: I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in your hands Lord, deliver me from the hands of my enemies, from those who pursue me.”

This world is one where we experience suffering and grief. We can use psalms of lament to cry out to God in the darkness and pain. But even in the darkness of a seemingly silent heaven, Christ has gone before us. He was forsaken that we might never be abandoned. And in our suffering as we wrestle with God in prayer he promises, “Surely I am with you always, even to the very end of the age.”