

Reflections on Psalm 22

Introduction

Psalm 22 is perhaps the most profound and intense psalm of lament of the individual (in this case David) that turns by faith into a triumphant psalm of praise for the deliverance God brings into the life of the psalmist. Similar to Psalm 16 from last week, this psalm is one of the most dramatically messianic of the Psalms (see the introduction to Psalm 16 about how the psalms are messianic). It presents in remarkable detail an account of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus in a prophetic poem written a thousand years before the events it describes! At the same time, the psalm speaks with painful and joyful images of the experiences of David in his own times. David spoke of his own distress and deliverance, but the language he used, prompted and directed by the Holy Spirit, is more precisely fitting for the experiences of Jesus in the excruciating death He suffered on the cross, and the unmatched victory He enjoyed in His bodily resurrection. One again, even beyond David, Jesus is the ultimate singer of Psalm 22!

And yet, this psalm is to be sung by God's people throughout the ages, including us. Do not miss the superscription (which is part of the Hebrew text): *"for the choir director according to the (tune) of the Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David."* While we have no idea of the original tune, these directions imply that it is to be used corporately by the people of God down the centuries. Lament was part of Israel's corporate worship and is part of our experience as Christians. We are not told the specific suffering in David's life that drew out of him this astonishing psalm, but it was, no doubt, an intense and dangerous time of suffering at the hands of his enemies where he felt abandoned by the God he loved.

This lengthy psalm has two main sections. Let's observe them one at a time.

1. The agony of impending death: an interplay of lament, confession and petition

Read Psalm 22:1-21

We are not prepared for the intensity of David's opening cry of feeling forsaken and abandoned by his God (is this the same David who wrote Psalm 23!?). This sense of forsakenness comes firstly from God's silence; a painful sense of the distancing of God from him at a time of great trouble. David labors in ceaseless prayer, but God does not answer. Nothing panics the servant of God like the silence of God. But this forsakenness is aggravated by the scorn and ridicule of unbelievers who mock David's trust in Yahweh (v. 6-8). David feels as though he is no longer human, nothing more than a despised "worm." He suffers public disgrace, and experiences the contradiction of everything that is to be true of one who trusts in the Lord. Finally, this forsakenness reaches its most appalling form in the total subjugation of the psalmist to his enemies (v. 12-18). He describes his suffering in "bestly" terms. Bulls surround him, roaring

lions ready to devour him, wild dogs encircle him. The beast imagery implies that the assault lacks any of the constraints of humanity. The distress of David is so profound, it is as though the very life force has been drained from him. His enemies have him within their power (they possess even his garments and clothing), they have pierced him and brought him to the extreme moment of death itself.

But there is more to see. Notice how these desperate expressions of forsakenness are each punctuated by an affirmation of faith or plea for deliverance, each beginning by focusing emphatically on Yahweh Himself (v. 3 “Yet You are holy;” v.9 “Yet You are He;” v.19 “But You, O Yahweh...”). David has not lost his faith. Even in the midst of great pain and feeling abandoned by God, David trusts in the Lord and cries to Him for deliverance. He remembers that he belongs to the people who have celebrated a history of divine faithfulness (v. 3-5). Yahweh Himself gave David life and caused him to trust in Him since his birth (v. 9-10). If the Lord was so preoccupied with David at the very beginning of his life, is He likely to go on hiding His face from him? Though he feels forsaken and God seems silent, David in desperate faith cries out once again for God to deliver him (v. 19-21).

Questions for Reflection:

Is it ever appropriate for Christians to use the language of Psalm 22 in crying out and praying to God? Have you ever felt abandoned by God (God was distant, silent)?

Why is David’s desperate cry not sinful or the result of a lack of trust in God?

What are some ways of fighting by faith the feeling of being forsaken by God?

2. The joy of great deliverance: a series of vows to praise Yahweh in the assembly

Read Psalm 22:22-31

Suddenly and unexpectedly the psalm takes a dramatic turn. We move from hopeless despair to overwhelming relief. The Lord has answered David! Either he has experienced deliverance or has somehow been assured of future deliverance. David’s immediate response and instinct is a vow to praise Yahweh in the assembly, the congregation of God’s people. As we learned in Psalm 42, “praise” in the Psalms is never private or silent, but a public, vocal declaration of the goodness of God and His deliverance in the midst of the congregation. David’s praise includes a word for the “brethren” (God’s people) and a word for the world. He calls on those who fear Yahweh and stand in awe of Him (a great description of believers) to join him in praising the Lord because He has not despised the afflicted nor hidden His face from him; He sees, hears and answers! The afflicted who seek Him will ultimately be satisfied. This is how David declares the name of Yahweh.

This declaration of Yahweh's praise in the assembly also includes a word for the nations. Here David echoes the language of the covenant with Abraham—all the families of the nations will worship Yahweh. He is not some tribal deity reigning over Israel; He rules over the nations. Both the prosperous and the helpless from the nations will come and worship Yahweh. With the seed of Israel (v. 23), they will form a "seed" who will serve Yahweh—a Jewish-Gentile worldwide seed in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. The Psalm ends by implying that there will be an ongoing testimony to future generations that Yahweh has accomplished "it." But what is the "it" (there is no object in the Hebrew text)? We do not discover the answer until we see the ultimate fulfillment of this Psalm (see below).

Questions for Reflection:

- Why is praise in the assembly so important? Do you have a vow of praise to declare in the congregation from this time of separation?
- Have you ever thought that your condition was so gross or so repulsive that God could not look on you in favor? How does David's testimony help?

Fulfillment by Christ

Few psalms speak with such vivid detail about the experience of Jesus in His suffering and death. David's words describing his situation were poetic hyperbole, yet these words go far beyond David to speak with uncanny precision about Jesus. Psalm 22 is quoted thirteen times in the New Testament, and nine of those are in the account of Jesus' suffering and death. This psalm was clearly on His mind while suffering on the cross. If the opening expression of being forsaken by God is stunning coming from David, how unimaginable on the lips of Jesus?! What could He have meant? This one who knew no sin and became sin for us, drinking the cup of His Father's wrath for our sin! The Son experienced abandonment by God, all the comforts of His Father's love were cut off and all the terrors of the Father's judgment were poured out on Him.

David's description of public shame and scorn became literally true for Jesus who was mocked for His trust in God. David's poetic description of being subjugated by his enemies to the point of death was, at points, literally true for Jesus...unquenchable thirst, bones protruding, hands and feet pierced, garments divided and clothing gambled for! Each phrase reads like an eye-witness account of His suffering on the cross. This is all the more remarkable when we realize that death by crucifixion was not even practiced in David's lifetime. It's as if this psalm was written uniquely for Jesus in His suffering. By reading this psalm one gains an understanding of not only what happened to Jesus but what happened in Jesus—what He felt and sensed in His moment of torment.

And yet, just as the psalm abruptly moves from deep anguish to joyful deliverance, so in the face of the darkness of the cross there shines an empty tomb. God has answered in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus! The risen Jesus stands in victory and proclaims the Father's name to us, his brethren (see Hebrews 2:10-12). God has accomplished "it" ...the final and ultimate deliverance of His people in the death and resurrection of Messiah. It is finished. And this deliverance will be proclaimed to all the nations as God's produces his "seed" in the "Seed" from every tribe, tongue and nation. Amen!

Pastor Mark

Application and Further Reflection:

Read **Matthew 27:27-56** and find all the connections to Psalm 22

- How does this psalm help you imagine what Jesus experienced on the cross?
- How might this psalm have been uniquely helpful to Jesus as He endured this suffering?
- How does this psalm finally give us hope for ultimate deliverance? What does Jesus proclaim to us about the Father?