

Honest to God – Tough Questions from the Psalms (Part 2 of 8)

“Why have you forsaken me?”

Psalm 22

Mark Vroegop

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 (Psalm 22:1–31 (ESV))

We are presently looking at a series of Psalms that asks honest questions, hard questions, painful questions, of God. We are looking at the beautiful and helpful way that the Psalms meet us right where we are. As I said two weeks ago: they give voice and verse to our pain. And that is why we love them so.

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. 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 cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). It is a pivotal moment in the death narrative. It is as 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 be willfully abandoned.

The Unique Pain of Being Forsaken

Were you ever lost as a child? I remember one particular moment in my own childhood when I was probably around five or six years old. I was shopping with my Mom at Meijer Thrifty Acres (that's what it used to be called!), and I asked if I could look at the toys. After I had perused the toy section, I became bored, so I walked to where I thought my Mom was shopping. Since she wasn't there, I kept walking and looking. Little did I know that she was looking for me, but we were both crisscrossing the store. After what seemed like an eternity, I was really scared. Eventually, a very nice woman who worked at the store noticed that I was wandering around all alone. She asked me if I was lost, and through some sniffles I said, "Yes." She then took me to the customer service desk, where the entire store learned about my abandonment. "Marian Vroegop, your son is waiting for you at the customer service desk." To this day I can remember seeing my mom coming down the tiled gauntlet between the sweaters and the check-out registers, half-running to meet me. The relief on her face was visible. The relief in my heart, as a little boy, was something I'll never forget.

My story ended well. Others do not. I remember sitting on the stairs leading up to our second story with an eight-year-old foster child who had only been in our home for about five hours. Her mom had made some really bad decisions, the police had been called, and now she was in a house with strange people. For her little mind, there was too much to process. She sat on the stairs, with her head between her hands, and quietly cried. "I miss my mom," she said. We tried to comfort her, but the reality was stark and painful. She had been abandoned.

Some of you know what it is like to be that little girl. It may have been a parent, a friend, or a spouse. For some of you this Father's day is uniquely painful because it was your Dad who abandoned you. There is something uniquely painful about being forsaken.

But what if it isn't a person? What if you feel as though God has forsaken or abandoned you? How do you deal with that emotion? How do you cope with that pain?

Pain, Belief, and Hope

Psalms 22 helps us with this immensely. It shows us that pain and belief can coexist. What's more, this Psalm actually shows us that **pain + belief = hope**. 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.

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 glorious triumphant tone. Let's see how this plays out and also listen for the echoes of the cross.

Pain: Being Forsaken

The Psalm begins with a strong and famous statement: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* 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 second half of verse one and verse two gives us even more color: *"Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?"* So the problem here is that the psalmist knows that God is a rescuing God; he is El Yeshuah, God of salvation, and he is El Shaddai, the all-sufficient God. But although he has this power and this ability, there are times when God doesn't act, when He waits.

Take notice of the emotionally-laden terms. There is a clear sense that the silence from heaven and God's lack of intervention is very painful. *"O my God I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night but I find no rest."* This is a confusing and exhausting moment. But it is also compounded by the fact that God could change the circumstances, and there is nothing but silence and inaction.

These are strong emotions and ones that Jesus himself felt as He hung on the cross. But He felt them in a way that we cannot really fully understand. As the Son of God, He enjoyed oneness and intimacy with the Father. When He hangs between heaven and earth, enduring the pain of an undeserved death, He really was forsaken.

Without giving too much away from the rest of the Psalm, you will see that psalmist comes full circle, knowing that he is not really forsaken. But in Jesus' case, He was really and totally forsaken. He experienced the ultimate pain of being abandoned. What's more, His abandonment was intentional. God the Father intentionally abandoned His Son. We can hardly fathom that pain!

So part of the beauty of this Psalm and its echo is realizing the extent to which Jesus was abandoned for you so that you would never experience the ultimate abandonment by God in hell. When you feel like heaven is silent and as though life is in a painful free-fall, just remember that there is a floor that Jesus endured so you would never have to experience that. You may feel abandoned, but because of Jesus' abandonment you will never truly be forsaken.

Belief: The Power of "Yet"

Notice that verse three and verse nine lead off with this small but important word "yet." This three-letter word gripped me because we often talk about the importance of the word "but" 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, "yet" is used for a parallel track. "But" seems to be when the scenario has shifted; "yet" is for moments when pain and belief must co-exist.

Verses 3-5 talk about who God is and what He has done. 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.

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 (Psalm 22:3–5)

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.

Specifically, you look at Jesus, His abandonment, and how it all fit into the plan of God. You use the crucifixion of Jesus to preach to your own soul. You use the gospel as your life-line when you are on the dark-side of God's will.

The collective witness of the scriptures and the example of Jesus become the means by which we endure. Just look at how this shows up in Hebrews 12.

1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. Hebrews 12:1–3 (ESV).

This is the power of "yet."

Pain: Being Abused

Verses 6-8 extend the pain beyond the silence of heaven. The psalmist is experiencing personal attacks from people. This 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.

Being in pain is difficult enough, but it is even worse when people use your pain as a platform for inflicting more injury.

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!" Psalm 22:6–8 (ESV).

Again, the parallels to the crucifixion are so apparent.

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 (Isaiah 53:3)

41 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 (Matthew 27:41–44)

Jesus knows what it is like to be abandoned. But He also knows what it is like to be abused.

Belief: Great is Your Faithfulness

There is a great line in the classic hymn, and it goes like this:

*"Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou has been Thou forever wilt be"*

In verses 9-11, the Psalmist recounts 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 life and see the providential hand of God.

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 (Psalm 22:9-11).

Again, notice the presence of "yet" in verse nine. The Psalmist knows that behind his life has always been a kind and gracious God. His request for help is based upon what God has done before, and he makes this plea while in the midst of pain.

This verse reminds me of one of my favorite lines in a hymn by William Cowper:

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

God's faithfulness is as personal for the Psalmist as it has been for you. And when life becomes painful, we are helped by recounting the goodness of God behind the dark clouds.

Pain: 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.

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 (Psalm 22:12-13).

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 Vegas).

Further, the psalmist is personally worn out. Look at all of the painful word pictures he uses in verses 14-15:

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 (Psalm 22:14–15).

Verses 16-18 bring us back 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.

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 (Psalm 22:16–18).

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.

Belief: Keep Trusting

We come back to the theme of belief again, and we find here a great model of what to do when we feel forsaken: we are to keep trusting, to keep asking 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 knocking (Matt. 7:7-11). It takes belief to ask again when you feel abandoned.

The Psalmist confesses his need once again to God:

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! (Psalm 22:19–21).

Don't miss this! There is something about praying while in pain that keeps you trusting. In other words, you trust by praying. You keep trusting by keep praying. In prayer you keep faith alive and strong. Prayer acknowledges our need for God.

⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you (1 Peter 5:6–7).

You humble yourself by casting your anxieties on Him. You keep trusting by continually calling upon Him.

Hope: Triumph Some Day

This Psalm has bounced from pain to belief three different times, with unique messages each time. In the final section, the Psalmist looks expectantly toward the day when God will ultimately triumph. He keeps his gaze fixed toward the final day, a time when everything will be made right.

The first section (verses 22-26) reference the psalmist's expectant longing for a coming day that will provide him the platform to praise the Lord. In the midst of his pain, he knows that another day is coming.

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! (Psalm 22:22-24).

Interestingly enough, the writer of Hebrews uses verse 22 in Hebrews 2:10-12 when he talks about Jesus' identification with human beings in glory.

10 For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. 11 For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, 12 saying, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise" (Hebrews 2:10-12).

Verses 24-26 continue the theme with a clear picture that the suffering is not wasted and he is really not forsaken. In other words, God is not cruel or unkind.

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! (Psalm 22:24-26).

The enemy may tempt you to think that your pain is pointless and capricious. But this Psalm tells us that it is only a matter of perspective and time. "The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied."

The second section extends this celebration from a personal side to an eschatological perspective. The psalmist lives with the ultimate end in mind. Notice how sweeping and global is his view here.

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 (Psalm 22:27-28).

Do you hear the echo of the Great Commission? Do you hear the call of Revelation 7, where people are gathered from "every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" here? Do you see the coming King pictured here?

Further, the conquest involves global worship and service. 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.

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 (Psalm 22:29-31).

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! The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was not only the forsaking of the Son, but it was also the completion of God's plan. God accomplished our redemption through the forsaking of his Son. A moment of forsakenness became the means of God's eternal purpose.

Aren't you grateful for Psalm 22? It lays out a beautiful pattern with so many gospel overtones for those who feel forsaken, abused and overwhelmed. The Psalmist shows us that pain and belief do indeed coexist. Forsakenness is not ultimate. In fact, it can be redemptive. Forsakenness can be redemptive. If you every doubt that, I would simply point you to the cross where you will see the greatest display of redemption through forsakenness.

So when you feel forsaken, take heart in the message of this Psalm and the cross of Christ - forsakenness ultimately ends in victory with God.

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