

Pierced for Our Transgressions

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on April 2, 2023.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.

Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our fathers trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried and were rescued;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.
All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;
“He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him;
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!”

Yet you are he who took me from the womb;
you made me trust you at my mother’s breasts.
On you was I cast from my birth,
and from my mother’s womb you have been my God.
Be not far from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is none to help.

Many bulls encompass me;
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.

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

For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—

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I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me;
they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.

But you, O LORD, do not be far off!
O you my help, come quickly to my aid!
Deliver my soul from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dog!
Save me from the mouth of the lion!
You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!

I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: (Psalm 22:1–22).¹

For the Christian, it is impossible to read the first verse of this psalm and *not* think of the suffering of our Lord upon the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These are the words Jesus spoke as he atoned for our sin. At the pinnacle of his substitutionary suffering, out of every verse of Scripture, he chose to quote this one. This is not without significance. He who is the living Word was not flippant with his words.

Rightly is this psalm of David understood as prophetic, as David was, according to the apostle Peter, “a prophet” and “foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of Christ” (Acts 2:30-31). And, as Peter explained to the church, David and the other Old Testament prophets were “serving not themselves but [us], in the things that have now been announced to [us] through those who preached the good news to [us] by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven” (1 Pet. 1:12). As we read with eyes to see, veiled references of Christ’s passion lead us to subsequent praise. But this psalm is not only prophetic but also the poetry of David’s personal anguish.

How then do we reconcile a psalm of David’s suffering with prophecy of our Savior’s suffering? Shall we pit secular suffering against supernatural sacrifice? If we do, we miss this beautiful truth: “[Christ] had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he could become a merciful and faithful high priest in things relating to God, to make atonement for the sins of the people. For since he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:17-18 NET). In this psalm, we see both ourselves and our Savior, who suffered for us. And just as Jesus quoted from this psalm in his anguish, we too are given fitting language for lament, not to wallow in self-pity but to look to our Savior, who sympathizes with us in our weaknesses, “who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). Therefore, we persevere in Christ’s provision.

Persevering in Christ’s Provision

Similar to other Davidic psalms, we do not know the *what* or *why* of his circumstances, but we do know *how* he feels, forsaken by God. The Hebrew word translated “forsaken” connotes

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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abandonment or alienation. Not only does he feel alone, he feels left alone, by the One who promised to hear and deliver his people. In the moment, such feelings may easily be interpreted as God's displeasure, as if we have sinned the unpardonable. And in that moment, our flesh would tempt us to turn to the world, as if God doesn't care or can't be trusted, when in reality his steadfast love for us continues.

It is in times like these that the pleas of our prayers develop in us perseverance. John Calvin explains it this way:

The true rule of praying is ... that he who seems to have beaten the air to no purpose or to have lost his labor in praying for a long time, should not, on that account, leave off, or desist from that duty. [And], there is this advantage which God in his fatherly kindness grants to his people, that if they have been disappointed at any time of their desires and expectations, they may make known to God their perplexities and distresses, and unburden them, as it were, into his bosom.²

Part of the blessing in persevering in prayer is realized in casting all our cares upon him (1 Pet. 5:7). Which means that when we feel forsaken, *that* we pray is as important as *what* we pray.

It is easy to hear David's cries to the Lord, however, and wonder if the Lord ever answers. (From the historical record of David's life, we know that he does!). But what we must not overlook is David is looking to the Lord. How often to do we do otherwise? Do we grumble and complain rather than carrying our cares to the one who cares for us? Do we seek to amuse our anguish away rather than petitioning our provider? Do we wallow in self-pity rather than lamenting to the Lord? In God's Word, David teaches us as much in his actions as in his words, making his prayers and supplications known to God (Phil. 4:6) continually, both day and night.

While God seems silent, David is not, pouring out his petitions to the holy One, "enthroned on the praises of Israel." David's feeling of abandonment does not rob him of a right view of God's holy sovereignty, just as God's seeming silence does not negate the praises of his people. How we feel must always be gauged against the truth of God's Word. David knows that his fathers put their trust in the Lord, and he delivered them; they cried out, and he rescued them.

Have you ever noticed, though, how we interpret God's work in the history of Scripture according to our timeline? In the midst of suffering, it is easy to forget the patience, for example, of the patriarchs. Abraham waited patiently for years and into old age for the Lord's promise of a son. Joseph was finally released from prison after years of waiting (Gen. 41). And Jacob's children were freed from Egyptian slavery after four hundred years (Ex. 1-15). God's silence in our situation does not mean that he is not at work, but in what feels like forever, or prison, or enslavement, we can begin to feel worn down.

David felt like a worm. In his suffering, he thinks not of himself as one made in the image of the holy God enthroned, but as a dirt-eater. He feels less than human, as he is scorned, despised, and mocked by his enemies, for his trust in the Lord. Such has been and is the hostility of a world in

² John Calvin quoted in Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 237.

rebellion against its creator. And we, like David, who know and love our heavenly Father, are guilty by association. Jesus said, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18-19). The apostle Peter helps put this in perspective, when he tells the church, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Pet. 4:12-13).

To rejoice insofar as we “share Christ’s sufferings” is a clarion call to consider our suffering in light of Christ’s. He was, as Isaiah describes him, “despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3). Upon the cross,

the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, “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. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, *I am the Son of God*” (Matt. 27:41-44).

Isaiah says, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted (Isa. 53:4). And so, when Jesus cried out upon the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” unlike David, he became “a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13): “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

In our suffering then, we do not cry out to an unknown God, but our heavenly Father, to whom we have been eternally reconciled for Christ’s sake. When we feel forsaken, we know truly that “neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). And when the “fiery trials” come, we look beyond our circumstances to Christ, even rejoicing to share in his “sufferings,” because we trust in his provision.

Trusting in Christ’s Provision

How easy it is to obsess over our circumstances, especially when they include feelings of abandonment, physical pain, and attacks from our enemies. But self-obsession helps no one, especially you. Instead, we look not to ourselves but to the testimony of God’s faithfulness. As a covenant child, David looks back to God’s providential care from birth through life, open acknowledgement of God’s care for him personally.

As David looks back, he sees evidence of God’s covenant faithfulness. Commentator Willem VanGemeren observes,

God has a purpose for the life of the psalmist, because he has shown him his love from birth. The covenantal relationship, too, has been from birth, because God had promised to

be the God of Abraham and of his children (Ge 17:7-10). God was his father by covenant and had taken it on himself to be his guardian and protector (v. 10).³

As David was a child of God's Old Covenant church, Israel, he could be sure of God's steadfast love and favor, just as the child of God's New Covenant church is assured, receiving the sign and seal of baptism. This is one reason why our Larger Catechism directs us to the "needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism." Amidst trials and tribulations, like David, we need to look back to something of gospel-substance, not only our birth and upbringing but especially our baptism, in which we draw "strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we were baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace," among other things.⁴

While baptism doesn't save us, in looking back to it, we are reminded that salvation is by grace through faith, not of our own doing but a gift from God (Eph. 2:8). Baptism is not a testimony of what we have done, but what God has done for us in Christ, "not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:9). And when we look back to our life's story, we realize that "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). The entirety of the Christian life is living in Christ's provision.

Living in Christ's Provision

As we witnessed in Nashville this last week, a person motivated by evil can steal, kill, and destroy the precious lives of those we love. And while the child of God cannot be snatched out of her Father's hand (John 10:29), our adversary sure can wreak havoc, like a pack of wild animals. David chooses three metaphors to describe his enemies: "strong bulls of Bashan," "a ravening and roaring lion," and "dogs." They are not terms of endearment but describe what it feels like to be surrounded by vicious animals. The land of Bashan was known for its fertility. It's where you'd graze your herd for fat cows and strong bulls. In Isaiah's day, Bashan was symbolic of prideful arrogance (Who needs God in the land of plenty?). But these bulls aren't the strong, silent type; they roar like a hungry lion and chase like dogs. They are confident in their strength and arrogant in their words.

Such seems the sentiment of the dogs encircling David, having no regard for the Lord's anointed or perhaps because of it. And so, they roar like a lion, which is reminiscent of Peter's reference to our enemy, the devil, who is ultimately behind every evil. Satan's minions are sure to surround and strike the child of God with all the evil intent of a defeated foe. For, that's what he and his followers are, eternally defeated by the cross of Christ. This is why we must never focus on fear but on faith in the one who has won the battle.

After Jesus' resurrection, Thomas said to his fellow-disciples, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side,

³ Willem A. VanGemenen, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 240.

⁴ "The Larger Catechism" Q. 167, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 319-321.

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I will never believe” (John 20:25). He did see, and he did believe (John 20:27-28), but the significance of the wounds was far greater than convincing Thomas with physical evidence. Isaiah says,

But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed (Isa. 53:5).

Upon the cross Jesus was indeed physically “pierced” by nails and a spear, but the significance of the piercing was a display of God’s redeeming love for his people. His suffering may have been at the hands of men behaving like animals, but ultimately he was “smitten by God, and afflicted” (Isa. 53:4) for our sake.

In his song “Why?” Michael Card asks,

And why did it have to be
A heavy cross He was made to bare
And why did they nail His feet and hands
His love would have held Him there.

And so it did, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The gospel does not promise us a life free from snorting bulls, roaring lions, and chasing dogs but tells us the good news of our greatest need, that a worm, such as I, has been reconciled to God by the death of his Son and saved by his life (Rom. 5:10), that I might glorify and enjoy him forever!