

“Dark Night of the Soul”

Psalm 22

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John of the Cross was a priest who wrote about the process of our journey toward heaven and union with God. He said everybody experienced what he called the dark night of the soul, when you struggle with loneliness, doubt, and isolation. I think that’s true. It’s a phase where God shapes us to love him for who he really is, so it’s really a blessing in disguise. I think it’s what’s going on in Psalm 22.

Psalm 22 brings together two opposite thoughts—the belief God has abandoned him, and yet faith in God. David is in despair, but he still goes to God. And in the process of the psalm, he moves from the abyss, to a place of comfort, courage, and the promise of deliverance. And he becomes a picture of Jesus, from his suffering to his exaltation by the Father. The two parts of the psalm explain Isaiah’s prophesy,

By oppression and judgment he was taken away.  
And who can speak of his descendants? (Isaiah 53:8)

The psalm is like a roller-coaster, and the emotions go up and down, in movements of both complaint and trust.

First, David complains to God (verses 1-2), and then expresses his trust in God (verses 3-5).

Second, David complains again (verses 6-8), and then expresses his trust in God again (verses 9-11) and also offers a prayer (verse 11).

Third, David complains a third time (verses 12-18), and then he expresses his trust in God a third time, and again brings a prayer (verses 19-21).

David’s words express a soul in great anguish. But we don’t know of anything he experienced that was ever like what he describes. Did he have any idea he was looking forward and prophesying about Jesus? I think it helps to look at Peter’s speech on Pentecost to see how we can understand how David’s words have a meaning he didn’t fully understand. Peter says the Jewish leadership handed over Jesus to the Romans to be killed. He says,

But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him—

(that is, Peter says that David, writing 1000 years earlier, was talking about Jesus, and now he quotes David)—

"I saw the Lord always before me.  
 Because he is at my right hand,  
 I will not be shaken.  
 Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;  
 my body also will live in hope,  
 because you will not abandon me to the grave,  
 nor will you let your Holy One see decay..."

"Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

" 'The LORD said to my Lord:  
 "Sit at my right hand  
 until I make your enemies  
 a footstool for your feet." ' (Acts 2:24-35)

Are you with me? Peter the Apostle, by the Holy Spirit the interpreter of God's word, is helping us understand how we are to read the psalms. He's saying David was gifted by the Holy Spirit to see beyond himself to Jesus.

- David's historic line was broken, but God put Jesus on David's throne to rule forever.
- David is dead and gone, but God gave us a Messiah who would rise from the dead, never to die again.
- David didn't ascend to heaven, but Jesus did, and he rules from heaven as our king.

Let's look at how David saw the future suffering of Jesus on the cross.

### First, God rejected Jesus.

The gospels tell us Jesus used the words of Psalm 22 from the cross. When he was crucified, darkness fell over the land from about noon to three in the afternoon. Matthew writes,

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)

When Jesus is praying the first line of the psalm, by implication he's also praying the second, "Why are you so far from saving me? Why are you so far from the words of my groaning?"

Why isn't God saving him? Because he's saving us instead. This is the heart of the gospel, that God rejected Jesus for our sake. He used him as the perfect sacrifice. The words the Bible uses are "propitiation," or "redemption," or "atonement." That means God used him as a substitute for what we deserved for our wrongdoing, and God paid the price himself to buy us back from the devil. It means, like Paul said, that:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." (Galatians 3:13)

Jesus took the punch for us, he stepped in from of the bullet for us, and God rejected him so he could accept us.

### Second, God refused his prayers (Psalm 22:2)

The psalm says,

O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  
by night, and am not silent.

David's words capture how Jesus cried out; but God didn't answer. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed,

Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.  
(Luke 22:42)

That cup is the cup of God's wrath, his anger in judgment that he promised to pour out on sin. Jesus prayed to be delivered from that—not to have to suffer that terrible judgment if at all possible. Isaiah 53 tells us why:

Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,  
and the LORD makes his life a guilt offering (Isaiah 53:10)

God didn't answer Jesus' prayers because he was working out his plan to deal with human sin.

### Third, Jesus was scorned and mocked (22:6-8)

David says he's a worm, and not a man. It's a way of saying, he's nothing, he's dirt, he's like the scum of the earth, and his enemies delight in making fun of him. Matthew points out that's what Jesus' enemies did:

Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!"

In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" (Matthew 27:39-43)

#### Fourth, he was mistreated by powerful men (22:12-13)

David writes that his enemies were like bulls, lions, ferocious dogs. Bashan was an area of pasturelands northeast of the Sea of Galilee, in the Golan Heights of Israel today. Bulls there were well-fed and big, and some got loose and became wild. We know they were dangerous because there are records of lawsuits of the first century lawsuits when bulls would gore people. When Jesus suffered from his accusers, when he submitted to beatings and whippings, he was fulfilling David's words.

#### Fifth, Jesus was crucified (22:14-18)

It's amazing to think that these verses were written 1000 years before Jesus' earthly career. It was centuries before people invented crucifixion as a way of execution. It came from the East, maybe from the Persians. The Romans used it as a punishment for the worst criminals; Roman citizens couldn't be executed that way. The condemned person would hang on the cross for hours until they didn't have the strength to lift themselves to breathe, and they suffocated. David's language paints a picture of Jesus' suffering:

- Pierced hands and feet (v. 16) describe his nailing to the cross.
- People stare (v. 17) describes a public crucifixion, where the shame is a part of the horror.
- Being poured out like water (v. 14), as his life slowly drained away. Jesus cried out from the cross, "I'm thirsty" (John 19:28), as he was being poured out like a drink offering.
- His bones out of joint (v. 14) describe his stretching out on the cross,
- His heart turned to wax (v. 14) describes his heart as it slowly gave out, unable to pump blood to his arms and legs.
- Divide my garments and cast lots for my clothing (v.18) describe the soldiers gambling for Jesus' only possessions.

With love so great that Jesus would suffer like that for us, how should we respond?

I think we should see that God's wrath and his love come together at the cross.

The cross shows God's anger over sin, because sin is an offense to his holiness and to his plan for the world. The cross was God's anger poured out on all the human wretchedness and evil the world has ever seen or ever will see. But it wasn't anger, it was love that made God take all that on himself. Because like Jesus told Nicodemus one night,

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life. (John 3:16)

God hates sin, because he sees what it does to us, but he loves the sinner with an unshakable love, and he says he loves us so much he took it on himself, and he died so he wouldn't have to lose us. So when we look at how Jesus fulfills Psalm 22, I should see how great a sinner I am, and how great a Savior I have. So, God's fury at sin, and his deep love for the sinner, both come together at the cross.

The second thing I take away from this is, I can give in to God's purpose in my life.

The cross shows I can trust him when he brings suffering into my life.

David says to God, "*You* lay me in the dust of death" (22:15). That says, God plans it, he appoints it, and it isn't simply an accident of fate. So Peter said, when he talked about the meaning of the cross on Pentecost,

"This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death" (Acts 2:23).

And when the believers pray, they say,

Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. (Acts 4:27-28)

In other words, evil men planned to do evil. But in that same event, God was working out his plan for good.

That means we can trust him. And David moves to a posture of trust in his psalm, and the end of the psalm rises like a crescendo of hope. In verse 24, he says,

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.

Do you see it? The psalm doesn't end in despair, but in confidence that suffering isn't pointless, and death isn't the last word. The Father has not despised the suffering of the afflicted one. Because of that, David has hope, whatever he was experiencing. Jesus didn't turn away from God in the dark night of his soul, but trusted his spirit into God's hands. Remember God's faithfulness when life gets hard.

And here's one more thing I take away from this psalm: Let's remember to tell the story.

The psalm doesn't end with death and defeat. And our story doesn't end with Jesus dead and buried, but alive. So David writes,

I will declare your name to my brothers;  
in the congregation I will praise you. (22:22)

The God who made everything also laid down his life for you and me, and then he picked it up again. A story that big needs to be told. Because Jesus is Lord of all, but he's only Savior of some, and that's "whoever believes in him."

Did you know you're in this psalm, too, if you trust in Jesus? Not just because you and I also have dark nights of the soul, and we do; not just because we are also raised to new life in Jesus, and we are. But also because someone once told you the good news about Jesus, and now it's your turn to tell someone else.

Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord.

They will proclaim his righteousness  
to a people yet unborn—  
for he has done it. (22:30-31)

This painful psalm changes to a joyful, grateful psalm because of Jesus' suffering. Put the cross at the center, and put God's love for the lost as your first priority.