

August 30, 2020

A PRAYER FOR WHEN WE FEEL FORSAKEN

Psalm 22

(6 of 8 in a series of selected Psalms)

I've noted it before, but there are two ways that the Old Testament prophesies. One of them is easy and straightforward. We might call this verbal, direct prophecy. This is the kind of thing we see when the Scripture tells us, for example, in Micah 5:2 that Israel's ruler will be born in Bethlehem. In these examples, the Scripture tells us something specifically that will happen, and it does. This is the kind of thing we're used to and our minds most often think about when we think of prophecy. However, there is a second way that the Old Testament prophesies. This second type is prophecy is not like that verbal, direct prophecy. It's indirect, we might say. In fact, you might read right past it, not recognizing that it's prophesying at all. And the way this indirect prophecy works is by providing for us persons, events, and institutions that serve as types and shadows in the Old Testament that resemble Jesus and his work in some way. We see this, for example, when the blood of the lambs was placed over the doorposts on the night of the Passover. There's no direct prophecy we read in the Passover account, saying, "When the Christ comes, he will likewise shed his blood to cover sins." But after reading the New Testament, it's easy for us to look back and see that as a type and shadow, isn't it? And the Old Testament is full of these persons, events, and institutions that serve as types and shadows of Christ and his work.

Well, one of those types and shadows of Jesus is David himself. You'll notice, especially in the Psalms, that David goes through experiences that are later lived out by Jesus. David is made king and is betrayed by his friend, for example, and then Jesus comes as our king and is betrayed by one who had walked closely with him. But it's not just that their lives parallel, there are times the Old Testament will speak of the coming Messiah and refer to him as "David." For example, in Ezekiel 37—which comes after David's death—the Lord is speaking of a time when he will gather his people and redeem them, setting up the Messiah as king over all. He declares, "My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. . . . David my servant shall be their prince forever" (Ezek 37:24-26). In other words, the Lord is showing us that David was always meant to be a shadow of a greater "David" to come—Jesus, the Christ.

Therefore, it should not be surprising to find that Jesus—in his days walking the earth—was willing to take David's words in the psalms on his own lips, for David's experience was meant to point us to the experience of the great David to come, Jesus himself. And that's what we find in Psalm 22. Psalm 22 is a psalm written during a time when David felt forsaken by the Lord and battled through this time of lament. But even in this psalm David will speak of his pain in ways that are greater and more extreme than what he actually went through. He'll describe his pain as if his enemies are executing him—something that never happened to David. However, the reason it's appropriate for him to write in this exaggerated ways is because he's a shadow (or picture) of one who would come and experience these things in a real and literal way. In Jesus'

experience these things would be no exaggeration at all. And therefore we find Jesus taking up the words of Psalm 22 while he is being crucified.

So, what I want to do this morning is see how we're instructed from this psalm of lament as to how to walk in a God-honoring way during times when we feel that God has forsaken us, and then we'll end by seeing how this Psalm is ultimately lived out in the life of our Lord. What then do we learn from Psalm 22? Let me note a few things.

Christians can feel forsaken by God

David opens the Psalm asking, "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" (v. 1). He feels forsaken. He feels as if God is distant. God seems silent, as if he is not paying attention or has turned his back on David. We don't know why. We don't know what David is going through, but that doesn't really matter. What matters is that he feels forsaken by God. And what matters for us is that the Bible is teaching us in Psalm 22 that believers can feel that God is distant, silent, and has forsaken them.

Now, to be sure, a believer is never forsaken by God. In Hebrews 13:5, the author reminds us that the Lord has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." The Lord does not forsake his own. But that doesn't mean that we can't *feel* forsaken. Indeed, I believe texts like Psalm 22 teach us that there will be moments when we will feel that the Lord has forsaken us.

But what I want to stress is that feeling forsaken by God is something that a *Christian* experiences. And the reason I want to say that is because some of you may be in the midst of a time right now where you feel like David feels in Psalm 22. You feel like God is distant and silent and has simply forsaken you, and you feel empty and desperate. And yet every desperate plea for God to say something or show his affection for you feels like it's met with nothing. Your prayers feel like it's just you mouthing words into the air. And you feel empty and hurting and weak, and you're interpreting this to mean that you may not be a child of God. But feeling forsaken or that God is distant doesn't mean you don't know the Lord. I want to say it again—feeling forsaken by God is a *Christian* experience. In fact, it may be a *uniquely* Christian experience.

The reason I say it may be a uniquely Christian experience to feel forsaken by God is because I'm just not sure an unbeliever has the conditions in place to feel this way. They haven't experienced what it's like to feel the Lord's delight, affection, and approval. Isn't that what we as believers struggle with—feeling like what we've known at some point or season is now gone? Their hearts don't long for the Lord in the way that ours do. Isn't that why it's so painful for us feel forsaken by God? Because our hearts long for him, we aren't those who are able to say, "I feel that he's forsaken me, and so I'm done with pursuing him." We can't. This is what we see with David. He says in verse 2 that he cries by day and the Lord doesn't answer and by night but he finds no rest. Why come back at night when your cries in the day have been met with silence? I think David would say, "Because I know the Lord is my greatest need," and so do we,

don't we? That's why silence from God hurts. So, if you are feeling that God is distant, don't be crushed. Don't give up. Start with the simple realization that what you're going through is something Christians can experience. Christians can feel forsaken by God. What then do we do in those moments? Let me note four things:

We share our pain with God

David expresses his pain to God without holding back. In verses 6-8, he mentions that he feels more like a worm than a man and tells the Lord how he is scorned, despised, and mocked—even mocked for trusting and delighting in the Lord. In verses 12-21 the intensity of his laments picks up. He describes those deriding him as animals—bulls, dogs, and oxen—no doubt because they're acting with less dignity than any human should.

He speaks of the physical ailments he is facing. When he says he is “poured out like water” (v. 14), it is like us using the expression, “I am completely drained.” He has nothing left. His joints, bones, and muscles are aching as he is wasting away and feels like he is dying—like his enemies are nailing him down by his hands and feet. Now, there's not a time we know of in David's life when many of these things would have literally happened to him, but he's expressing his pain in exaggerated terms.

But this is the point, David is not reserved as he approaches the Lord in his pain. If anything, he exaggerates his suffering. And yet he speaks of his suffering to God—the one whom he feels has forsaken him. And this is so utterly key for the believer. Do not allow your pain and sorrow to lead you away from the Lord but run toward him. Share your pain with him. Someone has said that when God seems silent, the Christian must keep talking. I think that is key. We don't shut down and walk away from the Lord. We keep talking and sharing and lamenting to the one who is our only hope—even when we feel that he is silent, distant, and has abandoned us. But we don't stop there.

We fight for faith, reminding ourselves why God can be trusted

Notice in this psalm how David isn't simply lamenting and expressing how he feels. He's fighting. He's fighting for faith as he reminds himself again and again why God can be trusted and why he indeed is not forsaken. After expressing his feeling of abandonment in verses 1-2, he starts verse 3 with “Yet.” That is, he's now engaging in an argument against his feelings. He notes that God is holy, that the fathers (of Israel) trusted and saw God deliver them, and how those who came before him were not put to shame as they put their trust in the Lord.

In other words, it's as if David is walking through Hebrews 11 hundreds of years before Hebrews 11 was written. He's making arguments for why he should keep trusting God, and he starts by pointing to all those before him who trusted God and weren't disappointed. But he doesn't stop with looking at others. After lamenting in verses 6-8, he reflects on God's faithfulness in his own life in verses 9-11. David notes that the Lord has orchestrated every second of his life to bring

David to himself so that God might be his God. In other words, God's faithfulness was showing itself to David even when David was unaware.

This is a picture of what the fight of faith looks like. When we feel forsaken by God, it is good and right to lament to the Lord, telling him we feel forsaken. But it is also right to tell yourself why you're not forsaken. When we feel hopeless, it is our duty to remind ourselves of why we aren't hopeless and must keep trusting. We can remind ourselves of those who have come before us and saw God's preserving faithfulness, of how the Lord has been faithful to us in our lives to this point, and how his Word gives us promise after promise that he will not forsake us, will complete the good work he began in us, will not let anything separate us from him, and will glorify all whom he has justified. We do not become passive when we feel like we are forsaken by our God. We fight. We fight for faith and for continuing trust in the one who is trustworthy and faithful. But nor do we stop there.

We praise God in hope and resolve to praise him in the days to come

Something interesting happens at the end of verse 21. We can see the oddity of this verse if we start back in verse 19. David asks the Lord not to be far off, to come to his aid, deliver his soul, and save his life from the dog and lion. Then, he switches his language, saying at the end of verse 21, "You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen." And I think that's probably a good translation, which I note because some translations give the end of verse 21 how we might expect it to go, writing, "Rescue me from the horns of the wild oxen." Isn't that what we expect David to say? How can he in one breath say, "Deliver me and save me" from a place of being in desperation and then say in the next, "You have rescued me"? Could it be that in the middle of David's writing someone burst into his room with good news that all his circumstances had changed? Perhaps his enemies were conquered in one swift moment? Well, perhaps. But I think it could be more.

We've seen other places where David writes with such confident hope that he writes about things that have not yet happened as if they already have. I argued a few weeks ago that he was doing that very thing in Psalm 3 when we looked at that text together. I think that's what David is doing here. He knows that God has made promises not to remove his steadfast love and not to remove his line from the throne forever, and so he speaks with confidence in God's provision, and then he praises him for it and expresses his resolve to praise him again and again in the days to come. We see this in verses 22-31. Every one of these verses speak of God's provision, of David's praise of God, and of David's confidence that God will continually be praised as his goodness and saving work is spoken of and passed on from generation to generation.

We must imitate this as well. First, we must mimic David here because God deserves praise regardless of our circumstances. He is, after all, the one who has saved us. You and I will never face eternal death and hell—though we deserve it—if our faith is in Christ. So if we lose everything in this life, we will still never face the wrath of God, and that is a reason to praise God, regardless of our circumstances. But, second, we praise God because we can have confidence like David.

Now, I don't mean that we have confidence precisely like David. I've noted for a few weeks now that David had received particular promises so that he could have confidence that he wouldn't be killed in battle and the like. You and I, on the other hand, have no promises that we will safely make it home today, that our sick child won't die, or that we'll have job security until retirement. But if we take time to think through the Scriptures, there is much that we do know is true and we can have confidence in. Owen Strachan has written, "Christian, God has not promised you: health, success, family coherence, comfort, pain-free life, earthly justice. God has promised you: eternal life, peace beyond understanding, cleansing in Christ, eschatological rewards, his unending presence, final justice, new heavens and earth."¹ Indeed, and if we focus on the promises we have, there is much cause—indeed demand—for praising God, even when we feel that he is silent, distant, or has forsaken us.

And we do not stop at praising him in the midst of our lament, but we also resolve that we will praise him. Should we feel forsaken, it will not stop us from praising him tomorrow and telling others why he should be praised. One of the most powerful witnesses is that which comes from a person who looks as if God has forsaken him, telling you why God should be trusted, obeyed, and praised.

And there is one final note I want to make about how we respond in those moments when we feel forsaken by God.

We remember the one forsaken for us

I mentioned that David writes Psalm 22 often with words of exaggeration. His hands and feet are not literally pierced. We have no historical evidence of David's enemies casting lots for David's clothing. He is not laid "in the dust of death" by the Lord, as he says in verse 15. But the greater "David" who came after his—Jesus Christ our Lord—did indeed experience these things in a way such that these words are no exaggeration.

David felt forsaken by the Lord. Jesus—as the God-man—actually bears the wrath of God for our sins and is forsaken. The punishment of God for sinners falls on him. Isaiah 53:10 tells us that "it was the will of the LORD to crush him." Romans 8:32 reminds us that the Father did not spare his own Son but "gave him up" for us all, that giving up refers to the Father giving up the Son to death. The Son willingly bears the wrath of God for sinners. He was laid in the dust of death. His enemies did mock him as he hung on the cross, trusting in his Father. His bones were out of joint on the cross. He was thirsting; we know from his cry on the cross. His hands and feet were literally pierced as he was nailed to the cross for us. They cast lots for his clothing, as he was hanging there dying on the cross. This was Jesus' real experience, and Psalm 22 gives us insight into the heart and soul of the Lord, even as he was crucified. Here, then, there are three things to remember.

¹<https://twitter.com/ostrachan/status/1261388533828386820>

First, he died *for us*. The reason we—if our faith is in Christ—do not have to fear being forsaken is because he became a curse for us and bore wrath for us. We will never know condemnation because Jesus experienced condemnation for us. This is why we refer to Christ's work as penal substitution. He paid the penalty for our sins in our place, as our substitute. And now we don't have to bear the penalty and punishment our sins deserve.

Second, because Jesus has experienced this, he can sympathize with us in our weakness. He knows what it's like to face suffering and hurt. He knows what it's like to struggle because you feel abandoned by God. He knows what it's like to feel these things because he actually experienced in his humanity that which we often feel like is true for us (even if it isn't). And because he did, we can know that as we look to him, we are looking to one who is sympathetic to us in our weakness.

And, finally, we remember that it is finished. Jesus, we are told, endured the cross for the joy set before him. What joy? The joy reflected in Psalm 22:22-31. Our salvation and a worshipful response to God that it brings was a joy that Jesus considered, so it seems. As he was hanging on the cross, he uttered the words of verse 1—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—but I think he also uttered the words of verse 31—"He has done it." He would've spoken in Aramaic, quoting a Hebrew text that was known to many in Greek, but you might translated verse 31 as "It is finished." It was a cry that the joyful accomplishment of his work was sure and certain. Like the end of Psalm 22, our Lord knew that his work would result in coming generations praising the Lord, even as we do this morning.

We trust and hope and rejoice and worship because of those words. Jesus has done everything necessary—in his life, death, and resurrection—for us to have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Let us then praise our God—even in times of lament, when we feel abandoned by him—because of what we have in Christ. Amen.