

When God Is Distant

The Cross (Part 17)

Mark 15:34 and Psalm 22 (Mt.27:46) 2/18/2023

What can you do when God is far away? You cry out to him and receive no comfort, no strength, it just seems like your prayers bounce off the ceiling. That actually happened to Jesus, and when it did, he quoted a psalm that teaches exactly what to do in times like that.

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Mark 15:34 And at 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?"

Introduction

What can you do when God is far away? You cry out to him and receive no comfort, no strength, it just seems like your prayers bounce off the ceiling. That actually happened to Jesus, and when it did, he quoted a psalm that teaches exactly what to do in times like that. Psalm 22 gives us insight into what was going on in Jesus' mind during the worst of his agony on the cross, and how we can follow his example when we feel abandoned by God.

The Fulfillment of Human Suffering

So far we've looked at the numerous references to Psalm 22 in the crucifixion account in the gospels. But there's also one in the book of Hebrews that we haven't looked at yet, and that one is especially interesting. And Hebrews 2 is a fascinating chapter. The context is about how Jesus fulfills all that God intended for humanity to be even though the rest of humanity falls short. He brings up Psalm 8, where mankind is supposed to rule over the whole creation, but you look around and you don't see man ruling all the creation. How do we explain that? Answer: Jesus rules over the whole creation. Jesus fulfills all that humanity is supposed to be.

Just as Jesus fulfilled God's purposes for Israel as the ultimate Jew and the embodiment of Israel, it's the same for humanity as a whole. God created the human race for a purpose. And everything that mankind fails to accomplish, Jesus fulfills as the ultimate human. Just as Jesus is the embodiment of Israel, he's also the embodiment of the human race. He's the

last Adam, the representative of the humanity, and so when he reigns over all the creation, that fulfills the promise that mankind would rule over all.

That's the context leading up to the part where the writer of Hebrews quotes Psalm 22. So what does Jesus fulfill on behalf of the whole human race from Psalm 22? Psalm 8 was about how the human race was created to rule over the creation. What does Psalm 22 say the human race is supposed to do? Answer: suffer.

Part of what it means to be human in this life is to suffer, and Psalm 22 (along with a whole bunch of other psalms) teach us exactly how we are to handle that suffering. All the psalms that teach about how the righteous man should handle suffering—all the passages in the whole Old Testament about how the righteous should respond to suffering—all those passages put together paint a picture of the ideal righteous sufferer. But when you look at all the characters in the Old Testament, even the most godly ones, none of them fulfill that model. David and Job and other OT saints were a kind of prototype of the righteous sufferer, but they didn't fulfill that role perfectly. And it built up the hope that someday the ideal, perfect human will come and fulfill all that God intended for humanity, including all that he intended to accomplish by allowing human suffering.

One reason there are so many connections in the crucifixion account pointing us back to Psalm 22 is to make it clear that on the cross Jesus finally fulfilled the role of the ideal righteous sufferer. Somebody finally came and suffered the right way. And he did so on behalf of the human race.

We Join Him

And here's what's so interesting about the Hebrews 2 passage. The point he draws out there is the fact that in Psalm 22, which describes Jesus' perfect suffering, that righteous sufferer calls us his *brothers*!

Hebrews 2:11 Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. ¹² **He says,** (now here comes the quotation from Psalm 22) **"I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises."**

That's from section 2 of the psalm, and that entire section is all about how the righteous sufferer calls all of God's people to join him in praise. And what the writer of Hebrews is saying is that everything the Messiah accomplishes in psalm 22, we're involved as his brothers.

By calling us brothers, Jesus is drawing us in to his victory.

That's an amazing truth. It means not only does Jesus win all the victories of accomplishing everything God intended for humanity on our behalf in our place, but *he also invites us into that victory.*

Jesus says, "I'll be perfect humanity for you." But he doesn't just leave it at that. Sometimes when preachers talk about how Jesus accomplished everything for us and we contribute nothing, they just leave it there as if our response is, "Oh, thanks for handling everything for me Jesus. I'll just sit here and turn on the TV." No. He doesn't just say, "Sit back and watch me fulfill everything humanity is supposed to be." He says, "I'll fulfill it..." then he extends his hand and says, now, come join me in this victory as my brothers. I'll be the ul-

timate human on your behalf, but then I want you to join me as co-humans.” And he draws us in to share in that ideal humanity trail that he’s blazing ahead of us. We follow him down that trail.

Remember when we talked about how we all need a king? We all need a glorious victor who will be a champion on our behalf so we can ride the coattails of his glory? We have such an innate need for that that we’ll manufacture it. We don’t have a king in our country so we invent our own. Someone is exuberant because Patrick Mahomes won the Super Bowl, and that’s *his* team. So he can jump up and say, “Yay! *We* won!” He says, “we” because it’s his team, and the reason it’s his team is because his wife’s cousin is from Missouri and is a huge fan. It barely takes any association at all for people to adopt a team.

If I’m happy about the Chiefs winning the Super Bowl because I live in Colorado, and the Broncos are in the AFC, and Missouri is also in that conference, and so the Chiefs represent me in that sense. That connection I have with Patrick Mahomes—it’s really 100% in my imagination. But this isn’t like that. We’re not just fans of Jesus. Jesus calls us brothers. If your brother won the Super Bowl, and he involved you in the game, that would be a real victory. Jesus didn’t just accomplish everything for us, he now involves us in that victory.

Model of the Righteous Sufferer

So how does he involve us? He accomplished a lot of things for us, and he involves us in a lot of ways, but how specifically does he involve us in the righteous sufferer part of what he accomplished? He involves us by teaching us to follow in his steps when we suffer, so we handle it the way he did on the cross. And how did he handle it? That’s what’s laid out for us in Psalm 22. That’s why he pointed us to that psalm when he died.

The Righteous Response to Suffering

So let’s see what we can learn from Psalm 22 about the right way to handle suffering. I’ll resist the temptation of doing a deep dive and going verse by verse through the psalm. Let me just draw some basic principles from the three sections of the psalm. Four principles for how to respond in those times when it feels like you’ve been abandoned by God.

1) How to Complain

The first thing we learn is how to complain properly. Most complaining is sinful. But there is one kind of complaining that is not only allowed, but it actually glorifies God. Is it okay to complain about the weather? No. About money? No. About people? No. Your job? Traffic? Aches and pains? No, no, and no. All that kind of grumbling is sinful, it dishonors God, and angers God. But there is one thing you can complain about, and the more intensely you complain about it the better.

What is it? Distance from God. Whatever the problems the righteous sufferer was having, it was that distance that made him cry out.

Psalm 22:1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?

Of all the things that happened to Jesus in the crucifixion, that was the only thing he complained about. Not one word of complaint about the beatings, whippings, mockery, or anything else—just that distance from the Father.

Can you see how that kind of complaint honors God? It's like if you said to your wife, "The one thing I hate about our marriage is that I don't get to see your beautiful face often enough. We're close, and I love that, but I just wish we were even closer and more intimate." She wouldn't say, "You're so negative—complain, complain, complain." No, that complaint would honor her. And it's the same with God.

And the more our eyes are opened to reality, the more *all* our complaints will distil down into this one complaint—whether it's triggered by an illness or financial problem or the weather or whatever. Here's what I mean—think of something you might tend to complain about. Suppose you fell and broke your leg, and it's not healing right and you're in a world of pain. The doctor messed up and now they're going to have to break it again and re-set it, but your insurance won't cover that.

That's a situation that would cause most people to complain. But look deeper than just the leg problem. Imagine all that happened, but God allowed you to draw so near to him, that you were full of joy—even more joy than you had before you fell. If you're that happy, then there's nothing to complain about, right? You don't complain when you're happy.

But suppose you have a problem—maybe even a really little problem—you stub your toe. But for whatever reason you have no comfort from God. No closeness. Either it doesn't occur to you to seek comfort with him because it's such a small trial, or you do try to draw near to him but you find he's far away so that you don't find any joy or comfort. And so you feel irritated and empty and unhappy. If you understand what's going on, you see reality and you realize, "I was happy when I broke my leg. But now I stubbed my toe and I'm unhappy. Why? The only difference is that other time God was close; now he's far away." And so what's your complaint? It's Psalm 22:1, "God, why are you so far from me?"

A minute ago I said it's sinful to complain about an injury or financial problem or traffic or whatever. It's sinful to complain *about* those things, but it's not sinful to complain in response to those things as long as your complaint is about the lack of closeness you have with God to give you joy in the midst of that hardship.

2) Shift from Feeling to Knowing (Live by Faith)

So that's the first lesson: only complain about distance from God, nothing else. Another key principle is to learn how to make that shift from section 1 to section 2. If you like to mark up your Bible you could bracket the first 21 verses as section 1 and title it "groaning." Then vv.22-26 as section 2, and that one you could title "praise." This shift from section 1 to section 2 is one of the most abrupt pivots you'll find in the Bible. Twenty-one verses of the most miserable groaning, then out of nowhere, exuberant praise—very dramatic, very noticeable, God made it so you absolutely can't miss it. He wants us to notice this shift.

In section one he does nothing but groan. Not a whisper of praise. In section two, it's nothing but praise. He calls for praise eight times in five verses. The only verse in that section that doesn't mention praise is v.24, which gives the reason for all the praise.

Psalm 22:24 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.

In other words, “All that stuff I said about ‘My God why have you forsaken me?’—that’s not reality. Reality is you really *do* care, God. You *have* listened. You *havn’t* abandoned me and you will follow through on his promises. When Jesus said, “My God, my God, why have your forsaken me?” it was a statement of feeling, not belief. And when he shifted from focusing on how he felt to what he knew, his bitter groaning turned to exuberant praise.

Be Honest About Yourself

That’s not to say the praise is the only good part. Section 1 is also important. Pour out your heart to God about everything you’re feeling. If we’re honest in prayer, we’ll admit that very often what we feel is the exact opposite of what we know to be true. God doesn’t want us to pretend our feelings always match our knowledge. So be honest with God about how you feel. God cares about what you know, but he also cares about how you feel.

So be honest with him and be honest with *yourself*. If you’re not honest with yourself about how you feel, and you pretend your feelings match your knowledge more than they really do, you’re going to lack understanding about what’s going on in your heart, and that’s not good. The way you feel tells you a whole lot about your heart and your beliefs, so don’t pretend your feelings are anything other than what they really are.

Be Honest About God

So be honest about your feelings, but don’t get stuck there. That’s where a lot of people go wrong—they get stuck in section 1 of the psalm—the groaning section. It’s fine to pour out your heart and tell God how you feel, but don’t ever stop there, as though your feelings represent reality. We must not only be honest about ourselves; we must also be honest about God. You say, “God, I feel like you’ve abandoned me.” But then always move on to section two. “*I feel* like you’ve abandoned me, but, of course, I know that isn’t really true.” Never make assumptions about God that are contrary to Scripture based on how you feel.

Living By Feelings

One sure-fire way to shipwreck your life is to live by feelings. You decide what’s true and not true based on how you feel. That will ruin your life. It’s so crucial to follow the lead of this psalm and make that shift from section one to section two—from feeling to knowing. We must always bring how we feel into line with what we know from God’s Word.

What are you going to do when you feel condemned, like a piece of garbage, but the Bible says God delights in you and you are a treasure to him? Are you going to go by how you feel or by what you know?

How will you respond when you feel like your spiritual gifts are negligible? Not worth all that much. Or that you don’t even have any. Or that your contribution at church is expendable. You’re among the non-essential personnel there. You feel all that, but the Bible says your gift comes from the Holy Spirit which makes it priceless. And the Bible says there is no part of the body that the body can point to and say, “We have no need of you” (which means you can’t say to the body, “You have no need of me”). Will your actions be governed by how you feel or by what you know?

What if you go to church and it *feels* like what happens there isn't all that important? It's hardly worth going. But the Bible says the church, even churches with serious problems, are the headquarters of his presence in this world and functions as the very body of the Lord Jesus Christ in this world and is the pillar and foundation of the truth and it's built on the rock so that the defenses of hell won't be able to stand against it and that it is the household of God and the repository of all the Holy Spirit's gifts in the people and it is at the center of God's plan for this age. Are you going to operate based on how you feel or by what you know?

How about when you feel superior to others? Or when someone rubs you the wrong way and your gut tells you to look down on that person. But the Bible says he is a child of God in whom God delights? Will your attitude toward that person rise from how you feel or from what you know?

What about in the moment of temptation, when it feels like sin would be satisfying? Whatever consequence God might send, it's okay—this sin will be so satisfying that the consequence will be worth it. But the Bible says no, it's never worth it. There's a 100% chance you'll end up regretting it. Will you act on how you feel or on what you know?

When you face danger—a financial crisis, health crisis, marital crisis, some really scary threat—and you feel like your safety and happiness are at risk, but the Bible says God is your refuge and fortress and your protector, and no matter what hardship happens, you'll still have access to happiness and joy through fellowship with him, do you let your feelings drive you into fear and anxiety, or do you focus on what you know to be true and rest in security and peace?

I could do this all day. I could give an example from every single aspect of life. Why? Because every single aspect of the Christian life is accomplished by faith. We live by faith. And living by faith means acting according to what you know, not what you see or feel. Living by faith means focusing your attention away from how things seem and onto what is actually true. Living by faith means doing exactly what the writer of Psalm 22 did when he shifted from section 1 to section 2 and his groaning turned to exuberant praise. Jesus endured that darkness on the cross by faith and invites us to follow in his steps.

3) Move from Why? to Who?

So we follow in his steps by complaining the right way, by making the shift from feeling to knowing (live by faith), now a third principle. When you are suffering, shift from the "Why?" question to the "Who?" question. Section one begins with "Why?" And when we're responding to feelings, our natural impulse is to ask the why question. "Why God? Why is this happening to me? Why me? Why this? Why now?" We want to know why. That has to be the most common question we ask in times of horrible suffering and tragedy.

That's how it was for Job. His initial response was fantastic. But over time, when the pain and misery dragged on, Job started drifting toward that why question. He even got to the point where he wanted to cross examine God in a courtroom in Job 9-10.

Job 10:2 I will say to God: tell me what charges you have against me.

He just wants to know why.

God does finally speak to Job at the end of the book. And he says a lot—he speaks to him for 4 chapters. But he never does answer the why question. He answers it for the reader.

The reader knows the reason for Job's suffering right off the bat in chapter 1. But he never tells Job.

Why not? Because that's not what Job needed. Would knowing the answer to the why question have really helped Job? No, in fact, it would have ruined the whole point of the test.

When you find yourself asking God "Why?" would it really help you if he answered that question? So now you know why—does that take away the pain? Does it strengthen you to endure the trial? No, it just gives you information. It might even add to your pain.

What *did* God tell Job? Job asked the why question, but when God showed up in ch.38, instead of asking the question Job asked, God answered the question Job should have been asking, which is the "Who?" question. God gives Job a 4-chapter discourse on who God is. He talked all about his power and his wisdom and his love and goodness. Four chapters of God's works and attributes.

Job asked the why question; God answered the who question—what does that tell us? It teaches us what question will really help us. Knowing why won't do you any good, but knowing the nature and character of the one who sent this problem into your life—that changes everything. When you catch a glimpse of his wisdom and power and love and goodness, that's what will give you strength and comfort. And that's what will turn your groaning into praise because again, it shifts you from feelings to faith.

4) Focus on the Future

Learn how to complain right, shift from feelings to knowledge, ask the who question instead of why—now one more. Everything in section 3 of the psalm is about the future.

Psalm 22:27 All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, 28 for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.

What really matters isn't the trouble I'm having right now. What really matters is the future glory of Christ. That's what got Jesus through.

Hebrews 12:2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, thinking little of its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

You can get so wrapped up in your current struggle that you get locked into the present and you forget—this isn't forever. What I'm going through—it's temporary. It will pass. And I'm ultimately headed to glory. Right now I just need to persevere and fix my sights on God's promises.

The 23rd psalm talks about going through the valley of the shadow of death right after it says God is my shepherd who makes me lie down in green pastures. If I'm a sheep and he's a shepherd, why am I in a dark, shadowy valley? Why would a shepherd lead the sheep into a dark valley? Only one reason. It's to get them to the next pasture.

Sheep don't like leaving a pasture even when the grass is all gone. But the shepherd knows they need to. So he leads them away from their familiar, comfortable pasture and it might be some rough going between there and the next one. But rest assured, the purpose is to get to that next one.

When you're in the dark valley, trust your shepherd. This darkness isn't forever.

Proverbs 4:19 The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble.

Proverbs 4:18 The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.

At the first gleam of dawn it's still really dark. But it's a hopeful darkness. A darkness you know 100% is going to give way until the full light of day.

Summary

When the writer of Hebrews applies section 2 of Psalm 22 to Jesus, it shows that Jesus is the Righteous Sufferer, who fulfills God's purposes for human suffering on our behalf in our place, but also invites us to join him in that victory. We join him by following in his steps laid out in Psalm 22. We complain only about distance from God, we shift from feeling to knowing, ask the who question instead of the why question, and focus on the future.