



Sermon Transcript

March 14, 2021

Psalms of Encouragement

Pain Turned To Praise

Psalm 22

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on March 14, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Psalm 22

Why Have You Forsaken Me?

To the choirmaster: according to the Doe of the Dawn. A Psalm of David

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 praise 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.

Introduction

I read a fascinating article this week, published in the secular magazine *The Atlantic*, and it was written by Tim Keller.¹ Anyone who has sat under my ministry for any length of time knows how much I esteem this prominent pastor and evangelical leader and how I have benefited from his insights through his writings down through the years. I am not alone in my esteem for this godly man and for the way God has used him for the sake of the gospel and for faithfully pointing our hearts and minds to Jesus.

In this article, Keller was reflecting on his personal journey this past year. In addition to what we have all experienced this past year with COVID, at the onset of the virus, Keller was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He said that when he and his wife received this news, they understandably “spent much time in tears and disbelief.”

Aside from being a pastor, Keller is a prolific author, and a month before he received his diagnosis, his new book had just been published and released. The title of the book was *On Death* and the book contains his pastoral reflections of things he has said to comfort those who were dying. And yet, after receiving the news of his cancer, he first turned to the internet—like many of us do—to find out the survival statistics for pancreatic cancer. While he was surfing the internet and absorbing what he was discovering, out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of his new book *On Death* on a table nearby. He said, “I didn’t dare open it to read what I’d written.”

In a very honest and transparent way, this highly accomplished pastor who is steeped in Scripture and has not strayed from the faith, shared the anguish of his heart. Listen

to what he wrote. “My wife, Kathy, and I spent much time in tears and disbelief. We were both turning 70, but felt strong, clear-minded, and capable of all the things we have done for the past 50 years. ‘I thought we’d feel a lot older when we got to this age,’ Kathy said. We had plenty of plans and lots of comforts, especially our children and our grandchildren. We expected some illness to come and take us when we felt *really* old. But not now, not yet. This couldn’t be; what was God doing to us? The Bible, and especially the Psalms, gave voice to our feelings: “*Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?*” “*Wake up, O Lord. Why are you sleeping?*” “*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?*”

Here was a man of deep faith in Jesus and great hope in the resurrection and who had just written and published a book about death. But in the face of his own death, he was immediately overcome with anguish and despair. He said this, “One of the first things I learned was that religious faith does not automatically provide solace in times of crisis.” But it does set you on a journey! The article talks about the journey—the road—he and his wife have taken this past year and how because of their suffering what they have believed in their head all these years—the theory of faith—has become real in a way that they have never experienced before. He testifies at the end of the article, “I can sincerely say, without any sentimentality or exaggeration, that I’ve never been happier in my life, that I’ve never had more days filled with comfort.” It is not without grief and it did not materialize overnight. It never does. But it is where the road of suffering leads to when our suffering leads us to Jesus.

It is the same journey you find in Psalm 22. It begins where Keller began when he learned that he had pancreatic cancer. Here David cries out, “*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.*” But then the road of this Psalm takes a dramatic turn in verses 22-31. The prayer of anguish turns to ardent praise when David says, “*I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you; 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!*” How does the person of faith who has a heavy heart get there? How do we get from the pain to praise?

On one hand, I feel a little bit like Keller who wrote a book about death before he faced the reality of his own death. Based on my limited suffering and pain, what do I know? And yet, while my suffering has been limited, I have “my stuff” just like you do. But that is the beauty of the Psalms. The cry of the Psalms come from real

people in real time and in real pain. Their cry of faith is real and it is raw. And you get to see the beginning of the journey and the end of the journey and the various turns it takes to get there when you are really feeling it. So I want to treat Psalm 22 like it is our GPS that lets us know what turns are ahead of us in order to arrive where David arrives at the end of this Psalm. I am not suggesting that these turns represent a nice neat formula when you go through pain. But they give you handles to grab onto when you find yourself traveling the road from pain to praise. Let me lay out the turns ahead of time and then we will take a look at them more closely.

Our Pain turns our hearts to God in Prayer
Our Prayers turn our hearts to God's Promises
God's Promises turn our hearts to Praise God
The turn that all of this hinges on is how . . .
The Psalms turn our hearts to the Passion of Jesus.

Pain turns to Prayer

Our journey on this road begins with pain. We don't know what the problem was that rested so heavily on David's heart. But whatever it was that David was facing, it was significant. Whatever he was facing was significant enough to make him feel as though he had been abandoned by God, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" During these times of intense suffering, God often seems distant to our prayers and David felt that way as well. John Calvin said that this feeling of God being distant is rather ordinary for the follower of Jesus. He said, "There is not one of the godly who does not experience in himself the same thing." David cries out to God by day and by night—this issue is all consuming and ever present—and God feels absent to him.

No doubt, these are honest feelings—honest prayers—David is expressing. Just like I was encouraged to hear the honest struggles of someone I respect, like Tim Keller, how much more to hear the cry of someone like David, a giant of the faith—*a man after God's own heart*. But we can go even greater than David. Psalm 22:1 is the cry that Jesus quotes from the cross. That feeling we feel when we are overcome with the pain and sufferings of life, was what Jesus felt and expressed from the cross. If Jesus can make this honest cry from the heart in the midst of suffering, so can David . . . so can Tim Keller . . . so can you . . . so can I.

Now don't lose sight of what David's pain is doing in his life. The pain David is feeling is forcing David to turn from himself and turn to God in prayer. There is no other place to

turn. It is in our pain that we discover how inadequate we are in and of ourselves and how much we need God. Sometimes you can be chugging along in life and things are good and you feel like you are in control and everything is clicking and unconsciously you have a view of God that assumes that God is there to serve you. When in reality, we are here to serve God. And it is often through pain we truly pray what Jesus prayed in his suffering and what he taught us to pray, *"Thy will be done."*

In the midst of his own pain, Keller was reflecting on how our culture has a hard time squaring the presence of suffering with the existence of a good and loving God. The question gets posed this way, "How can you say that God is good when God allows suffering like we see in this world and in our own lives?" He said that this intellectual struggle is somewhat unique to our age and our culture that seeks to avoid pain at all costs. Prior to our modern age, people did not live with the assumption that we all deserve a problem free life. And just because our finite minds cannot comprehend how an infinite God can use suffering for our good, doesn't mean that God isn't at work for our good in our pain. So really what is at play here is that we have an inflated view of ourselves and it is through pain that we turn to the only one who is adequate. Until we are willing to entrust our finite lives into the loving hands of an infinite God, our pain will lead to anger, fear and confusion. David's pain turned him to God in prayer.

Prayer turns to Promise

As David turns from his pain to prayer, his prayer turns his heart to the promises of God. It is very fascinating to watch how David moves back and forth between his pain and the promises of God. For example, after crying out in the first two verses about how he feels abandoned by God in his pain, he reminds himself that God did not abandon his forefathers when they went through their pain. God took care of them and so that testimony of God's good care in the past comforts him in his own pain. It reminds him of what God is like. Look what he says in verses 4-5, *"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 then in verse 6, he is quickly right back to feeling the pain of his suffering and this pattern between pain and promise is repeated three times. But each time his prayer leads him to the promises of God.

Joni Eareckson Tada, in her book on suffering, *When God Weeps*, made the following observation. "Emotions are one of the least reliable yet most influential forces in our lives. One day we are hopeful; the next, we hate. Despair at one time; delight, the other. Emotions are the surging, restless tides that keep ebbing and

flowing, drawing us up and then pushing us down.”² Our emotions are up and down in times of pain and in the midst of these varied emotions we are called to remember God and his promises. Joni put it this way, “Never doubt in the darkness what you once believed in the light.”³ It is a back and forth between what we are feeling and what we know to be true about God.

So after the first back and forth, when David in his prayer confessed that he felt abandoned by God, he was reminded that God does not abandon his own. The testimony of those who have come before us is that when they cried out to God in their pain, God was there and God delivered them. That is the beauty of being in a church that is multi-generational. One generation speaks to the pain of the next generation as a testimony to God’s faithfulness good care.

But then in verse 6, David’s emotions get the best of him again and he feels worthless. Here he prays, *“But I am a worm and not a man.”* Because of his pain—whatever the cause—he feels that others are against him and that he is of little value. Whether this is due to his perception of things or he is directly being opposed by others, it does not matter. His pain is causing him to feel unloved and unworthy. His pain calls into question his sense of worth. But then, God reminds him that from the very beginning of his life, God has always been there and that he has been blessed with the gift of life itself. He is reminded in verse 9, *“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.”* He is simply reminded that he is loved and of value to God.

But then, once again, fear takes over and he feels hemmed in and trapped by his pain and his problems. He likens his situation in verse 12 to being surrounded by the *“strong bulls of Bashan.”* Bashan was a fertile area and the bulls had ample food to graze on and consequently, they were healthy and strong. And so David’s enemies—or his problem—was likened to being surrounded by these strong bulls of Bashan, or he is staring down the fearsome teeth of a lion (13) or having been encircled by a band of wild dogs (16). So whatever it is that is causing his pain, or whatever it is that is causing your pain—just fill in the blank—it is producing within him an anxious fear. This problem is too big for me to handle and put in my nice neat box. Because I can’t control it, I become filled with fear. But that fear turns to trust and he is reminded of the one place he can turn. That prayer turns to the promise of God. And for the third time he expresses his faith and this time prays, *“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 find a lot of comfort in watching this back and forth between David’s feelings and what he knows to be true—between his prayer and the promises of God. It reminds me that in my pain I need to daily give myself to God. Keller said that this was absolutely vital to dealing with his own pain this past year. In addition to immersing himself in the Psalms, he said that a discipline that helped him was a discipline he called “soliloquy.” It is another way of saying, “I am learning how to talk to myself.” It is what they do in the Psalms. The Psalmist asks himself, “*Why are you cast down, O my soul?*” Or, the psalmist says to himself, “*Bless the Lord, O my soul. And forget not all his benefits.*” Who is he talking to? He is speaking the truth of God to himself. That is what David is doing here as well. As someone confessed to me recently in their own pain, that through prayer they said to their soul—“it is going to be alright.” However our good and sovereign God chooses to work, it will be alright. Prayer turns our hearts to God’s promises.

God’s Promises turn to Praise

God’s promises lead us to praise God. That is exactly what we see starting in verse 22. Starting in verse 22 there is a change of tone that blankets the rest of the Psalm. The rest of the Psalm is filled with praise and thanksgiving to God. We read in verse 22, “*I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.*” What happened? Why the change of tone? Look what he says in verse 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.*” David adds to the long list of God’s people who can testify that God has carried him through. Praise God!

That is what I found so inspiring about Keller’s article. Keep in mind that it was published in a secular magazine—what a wonderful testimony. Here is the question. In what way has God delivered Tim Keller and his wife? He still has pancreatic cancer! But in a real and powerful way, what he had believed in his head all these years, has now become his reality in his heart, something he has experienced. He knows God in a way that no book could fully form in him. In many ways, through his pain and his prayer and the promises of God, the deliverance he experienced was a deliverance from himself and the things he found to be more important than God.

It is so easy to take the good things of life and make them the ultimate things; and he said that is what he did with his own ministry. When we do that we try to make this world into a heaven it can never be. Strangely, he said, as he released this world of that expectation it has allowed him to enjoy the blessings of each day, even while facing his own mortality. He wrote, “We have found that the simplest things—from sun on the water and flowers in the vase to our own embraces, sex, and conversation—bring more joy than ever.” This strange delight has caught him by surprise and it is the result of not grounding our comfort and security in this world—our world can’t deliver that. Instead, it is found in grounding our hope and our rest in God.

I am struck by the words of verses 25-26. “*From you comes my praise in the great congregation.*” How do our words of praise come from God? It is through being broad swiped by pain that causes us to turn our hearts to God as the only one who can fully satisfy us. When we find our rest in God, our praise freely flows from us. That is what he says in verse 26. “*The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD!*” It is the invitation of Isaiah 55, “*Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in rich food.*” The promises of God cause us to find our rest in God and this leads to our praise—even while still living in the pain of life.

The Psalms turn our hearts to the Passion of Jesus

The reason we can turn in our pain to prayer and know that the promises of God are sure is because of where this Psalm points us. It points us to the cross. It point us to Jesus. This is the fountain of our praise. Many have called Psalm 22, “the Psalm of the cross.” And for good reason. Right out of the gate, in the first verse we read the words Jesus cried from the cross, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”

But this opening statement is not the only picture of the cross in this Psalm. It is in Psalm 22:17 that we see garments being divided through the casting of lots just like the soldiers did at the foot of the cross where Jesus hung. In verses 7 and 17 we hear the crowd jeering and casting insults upon Jesus. In Psalm 22:8 you can even hear the crowd challenging and mocking Jesus as he hung from the cross, “*He trusts in the LORD, let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him.*”

Furthermore, David penned these words in Psalm 22 long before crucifixion was used as a form of capital punishment. And yet, as you read verses 12-17 you have a rather uncanny description of the horrible death one experienced while hanging from the cross. David writes, *“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—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 what I find most intriguing here is that of the “seven words Jesus spoke from the cross” three of them come from Psalm 22. We already heard the cry, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* But the simple cry, *“I thirst”* is drawn from this Psalm where his thirst is described in graphic detail, *“my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws.”* And then, at the end of the Psalm, with a measure of victory, David proclaims of God that *he has done it*. This is reminiscent of the words of victory Jesus proclaims when he says, *“It is finished!”*

It seems to me, that while Jesus is dying on the cross and atoning for our sin, he is intentionally walking us through Psalm 22 because of how this Psalm speaks of God’s deliverance. In verse 27 he speaks of a future and sure hope for this broken world, *“All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.”* He adds in verse 30 that *“Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the LORD to the coming generation.”* This is the assurance that a time of suffering will lead to a time of great spreading of the knowledge of God throughout the earth. Is this not the result of the work of Jesus on the cross. From the time of Pentecost to today, all around the world, Jesus is known and worshiped. This is the work of the cross of Jesus and his subsequent resurrection from the dead.

This was Keller’s testimony. He said that the resurrection had to finally become real to him if he was going to make it through this road of pain and suffering. By real, I mean, more than a doctrine to believe. Instead it has to become something that guards his heart. He said that one of the “soliloquies” he needed to speak to his heart was “the costly love, death, and resurrection of Jesus.” And so he prays, “As I lay down in sleep and rose this morning only by your grace, keep me in joyful, lively remembrance that whatever happens, I will someday know my final rising, because Jesus Christ lay down in death for me, and rose for my justification.” This Psalm

leads us to the Passion of Jesus—the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is because of this very hope that Psalm 22 points us to that we can confidently move from pain to prayer to promise to praise.

Conclusion

If I were to ask you to fill in the blank _____ with a particular pain, what would you put in there? Is there something right now in your life that is far bigger than what you can fix or control and it often seizes your emotions with feeling alone or like you have failed or like you are hemmed in and can't escape. If so, spend sometime in the journey down the road that moves you from pain to praise. Spend some time walking through Psalm 22.

“Sir, I'm lost in my pain. Can you tell me how to get to praise?” First, you need to go down and turn left to prayer. Turn to God. Tell him your fears and express your pain. Then go down a few blocks and turn to his promises. In fact, speak his promises to your heart because your emotions need to hear that God has delivered his people in the past and that he has been with you from the beginning and that each day is his gift to you. And furthermore, you can call on him to deliver you from the things that you are trusting more than him—the good things that you are making ultimate things in your life—the things that can't deliver what only heaven can. This is what will bring you home, to be able to praise God. And all of this is sure because Jesus passed through the same waters, but in his death he has atoned for your sin and through his resurrection, we know that God will safely bring us home. This is how you journey from pain to praise. Until God takes us home, we will travel this road on a regular basis—but in the end we will truly find God to be good.

¹Tim Keller “Growing My Faith in the Face of Death” *The Atlantic* March 7, 2021

²Joni Eareckson Tada *When God Weeps* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 161

³Ibid., 161

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What lessons has God taught you through this “year of COVID?”
2. Spend some time giving thanks for what God has taught you and spend some time praying for the issues related to the ongoing struggle with COVID.

Diving Into The Word

3. Read Psalm 22:1-21 and trace the back and forth of David’s prayer. In each section try to discern what he is struggling with and then what speaks peace to his heart.

Section 1—Psalm 22:1-5

Section 2—Psalm 22:6-10

Section 3—Psalm 22:11-21

Which struggle can you relate to the most and why?

Which word of encouragement speaks to your heart the most and why?

4. Read Psalm 22:22-31. What is our future hope and how does our pain and suffering cause us to put our hope in Jesus? What “good things” in life do you tend to turn into “ultimate things” in your life?
5. Read Hebrews 12:1-2. What encouragement do you get from this passage as you process your own pain?

Taking It Home

6. In light of your conversation, how can you pray for each other?
7. How can you come around someone this week who is in need of help?