

- 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?
- ² O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent.
- ³ Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the praise of Israel. ^[a]
- ⁴ In you our fathers put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.
- ⁵ They cried to you and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not disappointed.
- ⁶ But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by men and despised by the people.
- ⁷ All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:
- ⁸ "He trusts in the LORD;
let the LORD rescue him.
Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him."
- ⁹ Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you
even at my mother's breast.
- ¹⁰ From birth I was cast upon you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.
- ¹¹ Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.
- ¹² Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.
- ¹³ Roaring lions tearing their prey
open their mouths wide against me.
- ¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me.
- ¹⁵ My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me ^[b] in the dust of death.
- ¹⁶ Dogs have surrounded me;
a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced ^[c] my hands and my feet.
- ¹⁷ I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me.
- ¹⁸ They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing.
- ¹⁹ But you, O LORD, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me.
- ²⁰ Deliver my life from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dogs.
- ²¹ Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save ^[d] me from the horns of the wild oxen.
- ²² I will declare your name to my brothers;
in the congregation I will praise you.
- ²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
- 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.
- ²⁵ From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;
before those who fear you ^[e] will I fulfill my vows.
- ²⁶ The poor will eat and be satisfied;
they who seek the LORD will praise him—
may your hearts live forever!
- 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.
- ²⁹ All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—
those who cannot keep themselves alive.
- ³⁰ Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord.
- ³¹ They will proclaim his righteousness
to a people yet unborn—
for he has done it.

-- Psalm 22

- A Crying out, because no answer (vv.1-2)
- B Fathers trust (vv.3-5)
- C Mocked because of trust (vv.6-8)
- D Confession of lifelong dependence (vv.9-10)
- E "Do not be far from me" (v.11)
- F Bulls surround (v.12)
- G Lions come (v.13)
- H Poured out like water (v.14)
- I Laid in the dust of death (v.15)
- J Evil men surround (v.16)
- K Suffering (v. 16-18)
- E' "Be not far off" (v. 19)
- F' Rescue from dogs, lions, oxen (vv.20-21)
- D' Confession of continued dependence (v. 21)
- C' Praise because of trust (vv.22-23)
- B' Nations trust (vv.27-28)
- A' Proclaiming because of answer (vv.30-31)

It's easy to be overwhelmed with the enormity of evil in our world. The first twenty minutes of any 6 o'clock newscast begins with the grim news we all unconsciously expect: more murder, more war, more strife, more suffering. It is telling that newscasts often make even more blatant attempts at lightening the depressive mood of their work by giving us more end-of-show kickers featuring waterskiing squirrels. Yet even as we are entertained, we sometimes become aware of how surreal it is to one moment be mourning the genocide in Darfur and the next laughing at a chicken that walks backwards. How are we, as Christians, to live under such extremes?

With double vision.

We begin at the beginning: *my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Jesus himself quotes these words—and consequently refers to the entire Psalm—even as he hangs dying on the cross. With our Christian senses now suitably perked up, we immediately recognize portions of this Psalm as prophetic: *"ah, Jesus was also insulted. His hands and feet were pierced. His clothes were gambled away. This Psalm is about Jesus."* Yet this would be a distortion of what the text originally was meant to do: to

give voice to suffering and anguish. To be a prayer for those who cannot make sense of the feeling that God has gone. To be a song for those who only know how to incoherently cry out in agony. This prayer is our prayer. This song is our song.

In order for us to sing it well, we first need to approach the piece on its own terms. We are tempted to rush ahead to the end and point to it like excited children saying “*See? See? Everything’s going to be all right! Now let’s go to lunch.*” Yet let us for the moment attend to the beginning of the passage: *God, where are You? Why are so far away? Do you not hear me when I cry out?*

Loneliness and alienation plague all of humanity, but somehow, it feels worse as a Christian. We tend to expect that being in relationship with the living God would feel blessedly assuring at all times, not as it often feels—devoid of His presence or care. We feel this most keenly when our teeth break on the bread of affliction.

Unfortunately, this is where experience and biblical theology seem at odds. Any casual reader of the Bible knows that God is never inactive, never *truly* silent. Any good evangelical can recite *Footprints* and say that God is there in the midst of our suffering. Yet, this is the very accusation that the Psalmist levels at God and will not let go. This is the bassline of the poem, the discordant note that sours this prayer and shadows the entire Psalm: *where are You, God?* It would be dishonest and inauthentic to look too far forward and not, as this Psalm does, move *through* suffering, grief, and death. Living in a society that does its level best to cruise out a pain-free existence often means we are left unprepared to deal Christianly with the pain of life in the here and

now. This is the invitation of the text before us today—that we enter into suffering well. This, then, is the shape of biblical lament—and it is to be the shape of ours.

The shape of Christian suffering is that we do not ignore the hard things that happen in our lives or sweep them under the rug in hopes that we might keep a smile on our faces. No, Christian suffering is honest suffering. Christian suffering is the suffering of Christ. He, *“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!”*¹ Therefore, we who are in Christ are to willingly enter into suffering and death. We enter into it because it is in our suffering that we are often made aware of God with us, God for us. The Psalmist calls out to God because he is at the end of his own strength and, being surrounded by his enemies, now is out of options. He cries out to God because it is Yahweh’s saving help he is craving. No one else’s will do.

Imagine now, the man on his knees, succumbing to another wave of heartache, another flood of grief. See in your mind’s eye his bowed shoulders, his shaking hands, his gasps for air as life leaves him. He descends into darkness, into Gehenna, into the pit where there is no sunlight.

And yet even as he is tortured and torn apart, he whispers the navel of his prayer, the core of his lament: *“But You, O Lord, be not far off.”*²

¹ Phi 2:6-8

² Psa 22:19

This is the core of many of our laments as well. For most of us, the question we ask most is not “does God exist”, but rather, “does God care?” Much of the bitterness we swallow would be easier to stomach if we had a sense that God *cares*. *Be not far from me, O Lord. Be not far from me when nothing goes the way I want. Be not far from me when all the futility of my striving catches up to me. Be not far from me when I am victimized through no fault of my own. Be not far, be not far.* But often, it seems our questions empty into an ocean of forgetfulness. We return again to the beginning: *have You indeed left me alone?* To be faced with suffering is bad enough—to face it alone within sight of a God whom we know could save us if He wanted to—*that* is even worse. *Why, God, will you not save me?* In the face of suffering we are all reduced to rags, for as Mother Teresa famously said, “*the most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved.*”

In verse 21, there is a reversal. There is daybreak. The TNIV translates “*anitani*” as “*save me*”, but it is better translated as “*you answered me.*” This is often the worst part of all ordeals: that so much of it seems senseless. Although physical deliverance is something we all want, what we really long for is to know that we are not alone or out of our minds when it comes to the complaints of our souls. We want to know that come disease, come destitution, come death, that a loving God hears us and is swift to reply. In the Psalmist’s case, this comes true in a single, often overlooked word: “*anitani.*” *You answered me.* It appears like a hiccup in the Hebrew text, as though the author himself cannot quite believe it: *You actually answered me.*

We come now to the edge of the valley of the shadow of death, the first step back into the light after a long walk in the dark. Where once you thought you stumbled alone in the night, you now see by light of day that all along you have been the apple of the Father's eye. You see all around you the community of God's people now smiling at you, now embracing you, now holding you up as we all blink in surprise at hope fulfilled. It is then that your lips finally come free to praise: *"Did you see? Did you see me twisting on the gallows? But for the strength of God, I would have perished. But for the mercy of God I would have died. God ended that long, dark night. God is good after all!"*

And who would hear such praise except the gathered people of God? Yes, they too walked through that same valley of shadow. Yes, they too scraped their knees and cut their fingers as they crawled out of this life's despair. These, the people of God who struggled on in hope, are then the people who are uniquely qualified to hear this praise and agree with it besides: *Yes, we remember your pain in the same way we remember our own. But for God, we all would have been crushed by the sorrow of that life. Yet now, we are alive. We are whole. We are together, and we are not alone. God is good after all!*

Those outside the Kingdom will sometimes say that there is a lack of earthiness to the average follower of Christ—that we're out of touch with the way things are. Yet the true Christian perspective on suffering is not that it ceases to exist or that nothing pains us anymore, but that there is hope beyond the evil we all endure. The shape of Psalm 22 anticipates the turn of our suffering into praise not because we ignore our pain

like a fakir walking on fire, but because God is not deaf, and God is not far away. No, God is listening and God is here.

For we who trust in Christ, the shape of Psalm 22 invites us to the cross. As Jesus entered into suffering, so our cruciform life takes us to our own Golgotha. As we look to the cross to remember that Christ suffered as we do—with all the frailties and limitations of being one of Adam's sinful race—we also must be prepared to suffer in solidarity with the world even as Jesus does. This is the call of the Christian—to suffer honestly, bravely, and with hope in the goodness of God.

Living as people of the Kingdom of God often means living with double vision, something that I am well acquainted with. We see two sides to everything: now the suffering of a world tearing itself to pieces, then the new Heaven and new earth. Now, we see malnourished children and brutalized women; then we shall see these children running as they play, and these women standing in dignity as they sing for joy. We see men falling to the sword and spear, spilling their blood for wars over land or money or oil; then we shall see these men hailing each other as friends as they beat their swords into ploughshares and spears into gardening tools.

If you see as I do, you see two things at once—overlapping images that never quite connect but are both quite real. Though it may be uncomfortable, this is what it means to live now in the vision of the Kingdom of God, seeing two things at once, but hoping for the day when all will be one.

- 1.) In what ways are you living with “double vision”?
- 2.) How does the hope of the glory of God permeate your life?