

If God is so loving and powerful, why is there pain and suffering?

Psalm 22

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When we think of the question of pain and suffering many are puzzled. If God is so loving and powerful, why is there pain and suffering?

In Psalm 22 we find a much-needed perspective about this question. It was written by David, who started out as a simple shepherd boy who would eventually become the greatest king of Israel.

David was a warrior poet, a worshipper, the one who had killed a lion, a bear and a giant, but who also could pick up a harp and calm a flock of sheep and even bring peace to a troubled king's heart. He was a songwriter who could put forth words that ushered people into the presence of God. David was a man after God's own heart, but still was willing to bear his soul in his writings.

In these verses we see David expose his heart. We see his deepest anguish and then his steadfast faith. We each can relate to his words as he writes about the pain and the suffering that life often brings and the emotions that accompany it.

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.*

Many of us recognize these words, not as David's but as Christ's on the cross, during the crucifixion. In Mark 15:34, as Jesus hung on the cross, He was quoting this scripture from Psalm 22. On the cross the Father had not forsaken the Son, but it truly felt like He had. Jesus had been spat upon, beaten, whipped, humiliated, forced to carry the cross, and now crucified. Romans 6:23 tells us that **"the wages of sin is death"** and in this moment Jesus Christ, the sinless son of God, was taking upon Himself the sin of the world and giving His life to pay for our sin.

He was the Suffering Servant written about in Isaiah 53. He had willingly brought it upon Himself, yet out of his heart-wrenching emotion He called out, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**

Have you been there before? Pain and suffering came and it seemed like God was nowhere to be found. It felt like God had turned His back and forsaken you. In those moments we join with David and Jesus in the emotion of betrayal, as if God has forgotten us, but like them, we must then see

passed the emotion to the truth. David had started by venting his natural emotions, but he then returned to what he knew to be true:

³ ***Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises 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.***

David had begun by crying out in anguish and frustration, but now he turned his heart back to the truth. From our limited, man-centered perspective we, too, might at times question God, especially in the midst of pain and suffering. But David then remembered . . . yet you are holy, praiseworthy, trustworthy, a Deliverer, a Rescuer who vindicates His people.

It is much like Job, who suffered the loss of his children, his property and his health. He had lost everything but his life. He cried out to God, but in the end God did not give Job answers, He gave Job perspective.

In Job 38-40, Job was brought face to face with the wisdom and the awesomeness of God. Here is a sample of God's response to Job's questioning: *"The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: 'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who shut the sea with doors when it burst from the womb when I made clouds its garments? Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth? Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Can you lift up your voice to the clouds and send forth lightning? (Can you) Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor. Will you even put me in the wrong?'"*

The reason I mention Job when trying to answer today's question is because we must consider how we question God. Are we seeking truth and greater understanding, or are we challenging His wisdom and His goodness when life does not go as we desire?

In Job 42, ***"Then Job answered the LORD and said: 'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.'"***

In the midst of the questioning, God helped Job see who God really was. To some this might appear to be a reprimand, God humbling Job and putting him in his place, but from another perspective it is God rescuing Job from the hopelessness of His suffering. If it was only up to Job, then all hope would be lost. It was God reassuring Job that he was not in charge, but God is. It is our loving Lord who is over all things, and in that we find our hope. We have not been left to face our pain and suffering on our own.

Because of our limited understanding, spiritual short-sightedness, and a perspective that is restricted to only the present, our vantage point gives us no ability to judge what God does as wrong or even understand what is happening from an eternal perspective. God sees all things, knows all things, and

loves those who are His. We may question why, but by faith we must move beyond the emotions to the truths that hold us fast.

That is what David did and that is what we should do, as well. When faced with pain and suffering we must tether ourselves to the truth of who God is and what He has promised.

God is all-powerful and all-loving, but He is also all-wise. In Christ we know the following to be true.

God will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). God is always working (John 5:17). We can cast our cares on Him because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). We are invited to draw near to the throne of grace with confidence, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrew 4:16). God works all things for the good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Romans 5:3-5). His grace is sufficient for us, for His power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all (2 Corinthians 4:17). I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

Whether our deliverance comes in this lifetime or the next, we know that in His truth we are secure. His grace is sufficient. God will supply all our needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19).

David had passed through his initial emotions. He then had remembered the truths of God. He now returned to his struggle and his need with this new perspective:

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

—I can count all my bones—

¹⁷ *they stare and gloat over me;*

¹⁸ *they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.*

As we read these verses we are taken back to the crucifixion of Christ. These are words of prophecy that were written 1,000 years before Jesus lived, but look at their detailed description. Verse 16 states, ***“They have pierced my hands and feet.”*** Verse 16 writes, ***“I can count all my bones.”*** Verse 18 even mentions that, ***“They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots”*** (Matthew 27:35). These are just a few of the Old Testament divine breadcrumbs that lead us to the Messiah in the New Testament.

In these verses David now reaches a place of humility. It naturally progresses from emotion, to remembered truth, to humble dependence. David describes his overwhelming circumstances and then arrives at verse 9 with the pivotal word, “yet”. David recalls the beginning of his faith and then calls out to God to, ***“Be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help.”***

David had come to the place in his suffering and struggle that he no longer relied on himself. He had taken his rightful place of utter dependence before God. This is the crossroads that each of us face when we suffer. Will we try to solve it in our own power and allow it to drive us away from God, or will we humble ourselves before God and allow the pain to usher us into a more intimate relationship with Christ?

God uses suffering and pain in the lives of both believers and non-believers. In the life of a non-believer God uses it to draw them to Himself. To reveal their need and His sufficiency. To expose the emptiness of their searching and idols of this world as He turns their hearts to Him.

In the lives of a believer suffering is a tool as well. As we read in James 1:2-4, ***“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”***

Intimacy with God was David’s choice. Because of that he prayed, ***“Be not far from me, for trouble is near and there is none to help.”***

Verse 19 continues with even more intensity as David calls out for God’s deliverance:

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!

David was not new to desperate prayers. As a boy, he had defended his sheep against a bear and a lion. As a young man, he had faced Goliath. While we do not know exactly when Psalm 22 was written, it seems to describe the period when David was running for his life from the jealous King Saul.

It is these times of desperation that faith is truly tested. When the threat is real and the outcome could be severe, and we have run out of options. It is in these times that we cry out like David.

Knowing about God is no longer sufficient. Experiencing His presence is the only thing that will save us. So, we cry out. In the midst of the tears, in the midst of the confusion, in the midst of the fear, we call out for a Deliverer. At this point the greatest thing that God can give us is Himself. That might even be why He has allowed the suffering in the first place.

In our poverty, we come to know Him as the Provider. In our sickness, we come to know Him as the Great Physician. In our confusion, we come to know Him as the Almighty Counselor. In our sin, we come to know Him as our Merciful One. In our loneliness, we come to know Him as our Companion. In our conflict, we come to know Him as our Prince of Peace. Even in death we come to know Him as our Everlasting God.

In the midst of our pain and suffering He is our Way, Truth and Life.

I heard a story about a woman who had been brutally persecuted for her faith. She was held captive for a while before eventually being liberated. She told how she looked back on those days and was so grateful for being freed, but at the same time missed the incredible intimacy with Christ that she experienced during those dark days.

It reminds us of the words of C.S. Lewis, *"God whispers to us in our pleasures . . . but shouts (to us) in our pains."*

If you are passing through suffering and pain today, claim the words of James 4:8, *"Draw near to God and he will draw near to you."* As you walk through the pain, you will find that He has been waiting for you there the whole time.

David concludes these verses with a call to testimony and praise:

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.

David now turns His attention to praise. That is often one of the purposes of our pain and suffering. That as a watching world looks on, they will see how God's children weather the storms of life. That as we give testimony to God's faithfulness, others are drawn to Him. This perspective is only possible

for those who view the Christian life as God-centered and not man-centered. Let me explain this way.

A couple of years ago, I read a book about Dog and Cat theology. It was interesting. Its main premise was the difference between a cat and a dog. When you serve a dog, he thinks you are God. When you serve a cat, he thinks he is God. The truth was clear. Many Christians share the cat's view. They believe that God is here to meet their needs and fulfill their desires. When that does not happen, they begin to doubt and even question God's power and His goodness. Since in their minds they are the center, then they begin to ask, "If God is so loving and powerful, why is there pain and suffering?" That is a normal reaction for those who believe God is here to serve them, but for those whose Christian life is God-centered they respond differently.

They still are saddened or even fearful about their difficulties, but they realize that God has forgiven them and rescued them from eternal condemnation. They know that there is nothing that could express God's love for them more than giving His own son to die on the cross for their sins, so even when life gets difficult they do not question God's love for them. They realize that they were bought with a price and their life is not their own, so God has the freedom to allow or even orchestrate difficult events in their lives, if it will accomplish a goal that God deems important in their lives or in the advancement of His kingdom. They know that God's glory is ultimate. Because of that, they are willing to faithfully walk with God in every circumstance. If that means living well or even dying well, they will receive this if it will bring God glory and point others towards Jesus Christ. This God-centered perspective is ready and willing to accept anything that comes from God's hand, if He so wills.

They are at peace with unanswered questions, because as Isaiah 55:8-9 states, ***"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'"*** They do not always know the reason for the pain, but because of Christ they have been made children of God and for them that is enough.

With this in mind, we return to the beginning question: **If God is so loving and powerful, why is there pain and suffering?** This question will never have a satisfactory answer if one is viewing it from a man-centered vantage point.

This question presupposes that pain and suffering are a bad thing. But from the scriptures we have seen today, pain and suffering are often useful tools in the hand of a loving God. Yes, suffering is a natural effect of a world that is filled with sinful mankind, making sinful decisions. But at the same time, the God of Job, who is so far beyond anything we can understand, is working in our world from an eternal perspective that we will never be able to appreciate or understand from our vantage point.

At times he will reveal the "why" to us, and at other times He will not. But regardless of what we pass through, may we first remember the love that has been proven on the cross and the eternal home that awaits all who have put their faith in Jesus Christ.

Let us close with these words:

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6)

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:3-4)

Discussion questions:

1. What did you find interesting in this sermon?
2. Why do you think we doubt God’s presence when we are passing through suffering and pain?
3. What truths of scripture do you think it is important to remember when we are passing through suffering and pain?
4. Can you think of a time that God used pain or suffering as a blessing in your life?
5. In your own words, describe a man-centered person’s perspective when they are suffering.
6. How would a God-centered person view suffering and pain?
7. What do you think you need to remember from this sermon? What do you think God wants you to do in response to that?
8. How can we help or pray?