

## Looking at the Difficult Psalms (1)

### Psalm 22.

A psalm of lament

Let's start this session with a less difficult psalm! Psalm 22.

**Read through Psalm 22 – all 31 verses.**

Whew!

*How do you feel, having read this?*

*What are the words that stand out for you?*

*How would you describe the way the writer is feeling?*

*How would you describe the emotional state of the writer?*

The NRSV subtitles this psalm 'A Plea for Deliverance from Suffering and Hostility', which seems to describe it pretty accurately. This is a cry to God from the heart, from a person who has in the past experienced God being close ( so recognises feeling "forsaken" v1) but who is now wrestling with a variety of trials and tribulations.

As so often in the psalms, we are not told what precisely is wrong or what is the psalmist's predicament. The "poetry" – with the figurative language and allusions that would have been readily understood at the time of writing – suggests illness and disease; you could also make a case for social /relational/ economic problems with resulting physical issues.

(This alluding to trouble in general terms only, is true in other parts of scripture. Admit it! You'd like to know what was St Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' , wouldn't you?!)

**What is the advantage of scripture being non-specific, as here?**

**Look at verses 1&2, then 3-5.**

What do you notice?

**Look at verses 6-8, then 9&10**

What do you notice?

This pattern - 'I'm in trouble ... You are great' / These are the terrible things that are happening to me ... you can sort it God ' is repeated through the first part of the psalm.

**Is this apparent movement between two opposing emotions unusual? Or something common to all people of faith?**

Have you experienced anything of this 'emotional see-saw'? If so, can you describe its effect on you?

**Look at verses 21b -31.**

What do you notice?

What seems to have happened?

Why might this be so?

**Now read the first two and last two verses.**

Here we can see a clear contrast between utter despair and energetic affirmation of God's greatness and ability to rescue and restore.

One school of thought is that this is in fact two pieces of writing put together at some stage of editing. Whether this is so or not, it is certainly not the only psalm that seems to add a "But God is good and all will be well" rider to a situation described as bleak

Can you think of any?

Think too of the prophets...On a different scale from the psalms but we see the same idea with, for example, Ezekiel's dry bones ( Ez 37), in passages in Isaiah and running through the minor prophets.

Look, for example, at the first 13 chapters of Hosea, then the final chapter.

Psalm 22 offers a couple of puzzles

What is the time frame for this psalm?

Is this trouble current for the writer? Or past experience?

The translation of scripture from Hebrew to English – not to mention the many different English versions – can make distinguishing between past and present difficult.

Do you think this is an example of a remembrance of a past experience or an implicit promise to God on the part of the psalmist regarding what he\* will do if delivered from trouble?

*\* I try to be gender neutral as far as possible but it is unlikely that the writer was 'she'*

Have you ever tried to bargain with God?

There is scriptural precedent ! Does anything come to mind?

( Look at Genesis 18:16-33; 2 Chron 6:12-42)

... God's response seems to vary!

If we ever need scriptural evidence that faith in God vaccinates us – or at least cushions us – from troubles, this is the go-to psalm. Verse 9 speaks of the close relationship the psalmist has had with God since birth but this does not prevent the experience of being apart from God, God not hearing the cries for help, even God having departed.

Do you have personal experience *from the past* that to any extent parallels this? If you are able to talk about how this, do. If not, take some time to think back and recall what happened. If this is your current experience, what might help ?

If we read this psalm as a description of past experience, verse 21b marks a turning point for the writer. Something has happened! Something has broken into the cycle of despair that God is deaf or determined not to answer and hope that God will rescue, with the unshakeable conviction that God DOES deliver and restore.

If, however, we understand that Psalm 22 is describing an ongoing experience, this is perhaps a psalm describing even greater faith: things are beyond awful but nevertheless God is to be praised.

How easy or not do you find it to praise God in times of sadness or trouble?  
Is this a measure of faith?  
Why should we be very, very cautious equating faith with an ability to praise?

*So how should we read this psalm?*

**Look again at the first verse of the psalm.**

Does this remind you of anything? ( Look at Matt 27:46 & Mk 15:34)

As Christians we recognise that Jesus used this psalm on the Cross. Jesus experienced what the psalmist is talking about – the absence of God. And although most of us can live through Monday to Saturday with at best a limited sense of God with us, we can still be devastated by the experience of praying into an apparent void. Am I really just projecting my helplessness onto an [imaginary] divine?

So it is worth reminding ourselves that this psalm (and all the psalms...AND all the Old Testament) was written by someone who had no certainty of deliverance yet who lived in the belief – akin to St Paul’s understanding of the word “hope” – that God has everything in hand. Even as the complaints and woes are being poured out, even in the absence of comforting awareness that these are being heard by God who will immediately act to “put things right”, God will not let the crumb of faith be wiped away. It remains – buried at times – but never obliterated.

The psalmist had a few things going for him.

As an Israelite he would have been born into a family of faith and therefore had an ‘inheritance’ of faith with the assurance that not only was there God, this was his God. And finally, however wayward they were as God’s people, he would have been part of a believing community.

We may have some of the same advantages but while the first two are beyond our control, we can all increase our faith by becoming part of a believing, worshipping community. God hears our cries of despair. Sometimes God responds through the words and actions of other people.

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Whoever wrote Psalm 22, it was someone prepared – or desperate enough – to be honest with God about how things were and how he was feeling. It is a one-sided conversation. We do not hear what God says in response to this outpouring, in keeping with the main complaint! But it is clear from the way the psalm develops that God has not only heard, God has also enabled a transformation within the writer. His circumstances may have changed – they may not – but he is changed. He has found a new depth of faith in God who is active and powerful.

**Reflect on this psalm. Say what you really want to say to God. Ask for a new depth of faith.**