

The Book of Psalms is a book of poetry, which was used as the “prayer” of “service” book in the ancient Israelite Temple. Composed of 150 poems, Rev. Eugene Peterson writes that, they form are a “prayer book that gives us a language adequate for responding to the God who speaks to us.” They can teach us how to pray. Psalm 22 is a prayer of disorientation (or lament).

Noted Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests (in his book *Praying the Psalms*) that as human beings we regularly find ourselves in one of three places:

1. a place of orientation, in which everything makes sense in our lives;
2. a place of disorientation, in which we feel we have sunk into the pit; and
3. a place of new orientation, in which we realize that God has lifted us out of the pit and we are in a new place full of gratitude and awareness about our lives and our God.

Using these three “places,” Brueggemann suggests that life has a rhythm as we move from one place to the next. He believes that that psalms match those places and the surprisingly painful and joyful moves we make. In short, there are psalms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. Recognizing that different psalms match these three places in our lives can help us identify psalms that fit our personal lives and which may provide us with the language we need to pray and live from a place of faith, whether we are in the pit, or in a “welcome place.”

Issued out of gut-wrenching anguish, the psalm is the cry for help of one who knows what it is to be bullied by his enemies, rejected by her community, and abandoned by God. It opens in verse 1 with a declaration of lament and despair. From that first utterance, the entire tension, and the very mysterious power of psalm 22 is between a plain assertion—“you are far”—and a lowly request—“be not far.” The psalmist tells of his desolation and, at the same time, does not cease remembering and invoking God.

The psalmist is attacked by enemies, as one attacked by wild animals; circled by adversaries like bulls ready to pounce and a lion ready to devour.

Despair is the raw feeling that comes from losing hope or having lost it entirely. It is the bleak experience of living without the comforting expectation of something desired (which is simply another way of describing hope). It can be related to the end of a relationship (romantic or other), sickness, illness, pain, suffering, loss, or even the imminent – and maybe unavoidable – threat of death. It’s a feeling that we all can relate to, as it’s part of the human condition.

God seems distant, while the threat, suffering and enemies are all too close. And then something surprising happens in verse 19. What happens exactly and what God has done remains as unclear as the original cause of the psalmist’s suffering. The psalmist invites others to join him now in the great assembly to praise God, and to praise God precisely because of what has happened to him. There is no hint of lingering resentment. God’s answer

SCRIPTURES FOR

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Psalm 22

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

To the leader:

according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.

- ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
- ² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.
- ³ Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
- ⁴ In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
- ⁵ To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
- ⁶ But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
- ⁷ All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me,
they shake their heads;
- ⁸ “Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”
- ⁹ Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.
- ¹⁰ On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me
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 encircle 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 mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
- ¹⁶ For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;
- ¹⁷ I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
- ¹⁸ they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.
- ¹⁹ But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!

seems to have wiped away any possibility of turning on his persecutors. They too are sufferers, the psalm seems to imply. God's gift is so immense that all are invited to sing to God with him.

The circle that was tightening of bulls and lions is replaced with the image of an ever-widening circle of brothers and sisters, others who can sign of God's deliverance, goodness and faithfulness.

But before they turn the page from the feeling of being trapped in a pit, to new life, from disorientation to re-orientation, something happens for just the psalmist. How does the poet walk back from the precipice of despair by himself? The psalm implies that it's through the power and process of historical memory: the psalmist consoles himself by remembering that God has helped his people in the past. They cried out for help, and God helped them. In the slavery of Egypt. At the edge of the sea with Pharaoh's army thundering closer. In the dry hunger of the desert. In the occupation of the land. In the turmoil of the time of the judges. In the attacks of foreign nations like the Caananites and the Philistines.

God will provide relief because he has done so in the past. Another strategy is to look back at his life. The psalmist recalls his birth and upbringing, and the way in which God protected him earlier in life (v. 9-10). Both the historical past of his people as well as the memories of his own biography provide reason for hope. His ultimate loneliness is perhaps only temporary. These remembrances are like amulets, relics of past hope, that he can hold onto in the reliquary of his memory. They are charms protecting him against his worst fears: abandonment by God and by everyone else, the loss of health, and finally the end of life itself. Later in Psalm 22 we learn that the psalmist bravely resolves to honor God publicly upon his deliverance and return to health. The amulets of past help and protection by God provide strength and solace to the psalmist in the face of despair.

We most often hear this psalm on Good Friday - associated with the story of the Crucifixion. The words of verse one are the only ones placed on the lips of Jesus in the gospel of Mark (15:34). He knows this deep, destructive despair as he hangs scorned but the crowd, abandoned by his friends, feeling banished from the secure love of God. It's the thought that God enters into the deepest despair we can know as human beings in the person of Jesus of Nazareth which illuminates our understanding of an incarnational God, who suffers with and for us, so that we can know love, life, freedom, wholeness and peace. In our series, it's a psalm of disorientation, a prayer for help, guidance, illumination, salvation and justice. It's not the end of faith, but rather faith in real time, when the rubber meets the road of life.

- ²⁰ Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the *dog*!
- ²¹ Save me from the mouth of the *lion*!
From the horns of the *wild oxen*
you have rescued me.
- ²² *I will tell of your name
to my brothers and sisters;
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;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
- ²⁴ For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.
- ²⁵ From you comes
my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
- ²⁶ The poor 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 him.
- ²⁸ For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.
- ²⁹ To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth
bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.
- ³⁰ Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
- ³¹ and proclaim his deliverance
to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

***What strikes or shimmers for you in this passage?**

***When have you heard this psalm before? What do you think the Psalm is saying?**

***What does psalm 22 say to you about the suffering of other human beings, either those you know or those who are different from you? Does it help you in some way to pay attention to them?**

- What does psalm 22 say to me about my own difficulties, and the hard times I sometimes go through?

- What does this prayer tell us about God, about Jesus?

***How does this psalm feed your soul?**