

Sermon 26, The Hunted Deer, Psalm 22

Proposition: Ps 22 speaks very clearly of the sufferings of Christ and the worship to follow.

- I. Why Have You Forsaken Me?
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 - B. You Are My God from my Mother's Womb, vv. 9-10
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Psalm before us is agonizing and brutal, but also tender and triumphant. The gospel writers draw from it heavily to show us the crucifixion of Christ, and that means that psalm is a portrait of Him. If you want to see your Savior, look at Ps 22. This is the king's song, a song of agony but also a song of victory.

When I was about 11 years old, my family began worshiping at an OPC congregation in Ft Collins. There was a psalm request time every Sunday evening, and for many weeks in a row, someone would request to sing Ps 22. We thought it was a little odd at the time. Why does this church want to sing "My God, My God O Why Have You Forsaken Me" every single week? Is there something we need to know about their spiritual condition? In one sense, I still don't know the answer to that question; in another, there is nothing wrong with a church that is willing to sing the sorrows as well as the triumphs of its redeemer. This psalm is for the choirmaster; it belongs to all of us, and though an "I" speaks regularly in the psalm there is plenty of room for "we" as well: "In you our fathers trusted." This psalm tells of the sufferings of Christ and the worship to follow. Pay attention, and before your very eyes you will see the Son of God portrayed as crucified.

I. Why Have You Forsaken Me?

The psalm opens with the unforgettable and haunting cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Oh, brothers and sisters, there is a world of meaning in that cry. Notice first of all the double address, the repetition of the name of God. That is a sign of intimacy, of tenderness, of love. David used the same technique to convey much the same feeling when he cried out "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son,

my son!" (2Sa 18:33 NAS) Do you see what the effect of the doubling is? It draws you in. It implicates you. It highlights and emphasizes the truth you already knew, thrusting it in your face.

What if the king cried out "My God, why have you forsaken me?" First of all, that sounds just a little flippant, maybe a little too breezy and easy a way of addressing the Almighty. It's a little more fitting to a loser biker asking his buddy in the bar why he disappeared for half the ride through Spearfish Canyon. It sounds more like someone whining about his rights than it does like someone whose soul is breaking, who is poured out like water and all of whose bones are out of joint. But the double address, "My God, my God, why?" — that sounds a lot less hopeful. That sounds like he really means it. That sounds like the king is in the deepest distress and trouble of his life. Even if he manages to come out the other side, he is going to be forever changed precisely because of the substance of his cry: God has forsaken him.

We have this adjective "godforsaken." We use it sometimes to talk about places like the Badlands. But generally it's a word that gets thrown around like the phrase "my God." Most people who use it mean nothing more than a reference to something sort of lonely. But the king is not merely sort of lonely. He is genuinely saying "I am under attack, I need your salvation, and I am not seeing any sign of your help. You have gone away and left me in the lurch, and I need to know why." This psalm does not directly answer the question, though from the rest of Scripture we know that God forsook the king in this moment because He was pouring out His wrath on Him in order to save us. Verse 15 already says half of that: "You, God, lay me in the dust of death." The bulls, lions, dogs and evildoers have done their worst, but only God Almighty can bring down His Anointed to the dust of death. And only God Almighty did. The king does not ask "Why have you betrayed me?" but he does ask "Why have you forsaken me?" What a contrast with the glowing affirmation in Ps 23, "Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." Thou art with me! But not so here in Ps 22. Thou art not with me, and I am in the valley of death's shadow, and I fear the evil that pierces my feet and hands.

The Trinity was not broken; the Father did not cease to beget and fill the Son during those hours on the cross. But nonetheless, in some lesser sense, Jesus Christ was Godforsaken, even as with this psalm He prays to the God who is really there and could hear Him the whole time. Allow me simply to say that Jesus experienced this loss of His Father so that you would never have to.

A. You Saved Our Fathers, vv. 1-8

In these first verses of the psalm, the king cries out asking how God could forsake him when God does not do such things. God is not quitter, not a forsaker. Our fathers trusted in Him and they were not put to shame! When my dad and grandfather and great-grandfather cried out in prayer, they were heard. God answered them. He never forsook them. He shows His holiness by being faithful to His word and His people. He is enthroned on the praises of Israel. You don't gather a huge following by being flaky, but by being faithful.

Yet here He has forsaken the king. Without God's intervention on his behalf, the king is nothing but a worm. Our fathers were not put to shame when they trusted in the LORD, but the

king has been reduced to worm status by trusting in the LORD. The people sneer at him, mocking him as “the beloved of the LORD” when it would seem obvious that this “worm” is someone God wants to grind into the dirt.

We spoke recently in morning worship about being made a gazing-stock to enemies. That is precisely what befalls the king in the passage in front of us. The God who saved our fathers has abandoned him and left him to the scorn of the world.

B. You Are My God from my Mother’s Womb, vv. 9-10

Yet the king does not despair. Even in this last extremity, forsaken by his God, he still prays, still cries out. He has rehearsed God’s faithfulness to his family and his tribe; now he mentions God’s faithfulness to him personally; indeed, he clings to it. He mentions God’s faithfulness in his birth, in his days as a nursing baby. And he reiterates what he already said three times in the beginning of the psalm: “You are my God.” He claims God as his. He insists that there is a covenant relationship. Imagine calling your bride “my wife” three times in two sentences, and then appealing to her based on the beginning of your marriage. That’s the kind of relational affirmation that’s going on here. God is the king’s God, and has been for the king’s whole life. By the way, to those Baptists and others who say that young children cannot be believers, I simply show this verse and ask them to repeat their hideous blasphemy. If young children cannot believe from their mother’s womb, then the Son of God did not believe from His mother’s womb. If babies cannot exercise saving faith, then Jesus Christ did not trust His Father while suckling His mother’s breasts. Frankly, this is why I have absolutely no patience for those who would forbid the little children from coming to Christ. Does Ps 22 affirm that any particular child, other than our King, actually trusts God in a saving way? Of course not. But that’s not what I’m appealing to it for. It most certainly affirms that a newborn has the ability to exercise saving faith, for it affirms that a newborn did so. Ps 22 does not settle the issue of whether a child is a believer. But it obliterates the fatuous arguments of anyone who claims that a child cannot be a believer.

As a child, as a baby, as a newborn, Christ depended on His Father. He called Him “My God”, and so He was. He was Jesus’ Lord, the God who belonged to Him, who was and is tied to Him by an unbreakable covenant.

And all of this only makes the abandonment worse. If you meet someone on an airplane ride and have a good conversation, and then at the end you go your separate ways, you don’t worry about it too much. It’s someone you only just met, and a true friendship can’t be forged in a single meeting. But if an old friend, someone you’ve been close to for decades, starts to drift away and abandon you, that hurts. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

The king sings this song, and He teaches it to us as well. If you feel that God has abandoned you, you are not the first Christian to feel that way. You need to sing this psalm, to read it, to pray it — especially to sing and pray it. Notice that the king says God has forsaken him, yet continues praying to that same God all the while. He pushes through what he feels — Godforsakenness — and affirms by his actions the truth that God has not forsaken him and will not forsake him, but will answer in His own good time.

C. You Are Letting My Enemies Kill Me, vv. 11-21

After recounting the history of his relationship with God, that God is his by covenant and was the God of his fathers, and has been his God from birth, he now begins to describe his situation in greater — and more terrifying — detail. “Trouble is near,” he says, and he names the trouble. Four different groups of enemies are attacking him and trying to kill him. Better, four different metaphors represent the extreme ferocity and deadliness of the enemies. If you notice, the enemies are introduced in the order I have listed them here, and then named again in reverse order down through v. 21. This way of saying “bulls, lions, dogs, evildoers wielding swords, evildoers wielding swords, dogs, lions, bulls” affirms that the enemies are mounting a comprehensive attack, but also that God is able to handle that attack. The enemies are introduced in order, and then mentioned in reverse order in the king’s petition for God to deal with them. Only God can deal with them, for the king is alone, with no one to help him. I’ve been reading *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* this week; it’s my first foray into Rick Riordan. The book is absolutely chock-full of scenes like this one: trouble is near and there is none to help. The hero, the son of a god, speaks in the first person about his troubles and rarely sees his father’s direct intervention on his behalf. The difference, of course, is that Yahweh decisively intervened to vanquish all of His Son’s enemies in a way that Poseidon never would or could intervene for his son Percy.

1. Bulls

The enemies of the king are portrayed first as bulls — large, strong, fierce, and brutal. No one wants to fight a bull. Rodeo clowns hide in barrels from them. Of course, these are not the bulls of domesticated cattle, which are bad enough. On the other end of the sequence, these are identified as the Urus or wild ox. According to Julius Caesar, who saw wild oxen during his time in the Levant, these animals are only a little smaller than an elephant.

Yes.

Strong bulls of Bashan, just a little smaller than an elephant, with nasty horns and the disposition of a Rottweiler. That is one metaphor describing the enemies of the king. No wonder the king says he feels like a little piece of dried-up clay, like his heart just melted and ran out onto the floor. This is not a battle with one bull or two bulls; many bulls have surrounded him. A huge number of these violent, bestial attackers attempts to swallow up and overwhelm the son of God.

2. Lions

The second metaphor speaks of lions opening their mouths to roar. Do you know what you see when a lion opens its mouth? That’s right: its teeth. The only thing more terrifying than a lion is a roaring lion showing off just how many razor-sharp incisors decorate the inside of its mouth. Again, the king is speaking metaphorically of his enemies, in terms of the danger they present and the fear they carry with them. We know these enemies as the world, the flesh, and the Devil. We can be lulled into thinking they are friendly and cuddly, hardly enemies at all. The Lord sees their true nature.

3. Dogs

And that's why he also brings in this third metaphor, the dog. The wild ox is majestic, like the lion. Both are large and fearsome. The dog is neither. A few dogs are kind of impressive, but none have the majesty of the bison bull. Instead, what's emphasized by this metaphor is the pathetic and greedy nature of the enemies. They are like annoying and vicious curs. Many of you know that there is no love lost between me and your average pooch. I have never liked dogs and they have never liked me. But the king's attitude toward dogs goes way beyond dislike, to the point where at the very end of the Bible we are told that dogs are not welcome in heaven. This is not because God hates canines, but because they represent what is low, evil, degraded, and nasty. Dogs eat dirty diapers. Enough said. That is the quality of enemy that seeks to attack the Lord's Anointed and lay him in the dust of death in this psalm.

4. Evildoers

By the parallelism in v. 16, you can see that the "dogs," "oxen," and "lions" are all metaphorical ways of speaking of the real enemy: evildoers. The powers of darkness, the rulers of this age, Herod and Pilate and the chief priests — they crucified Christ. But they did it with the permission of His Father, as v. 15 says: You lay me in the dust of death. Our King walked the way to dusty death, carrying His cross, because He knew that it was the Father's will for Him to die. He laid down His own life. No one took it from Him. But it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief.

The psalm references the piercing of hands and feet — a detail that could only refer to crucifixion. Once again, the king tells us that he is a gazing-stock, and that it is miserable. I have ranted before to you about the overwhelming bold lie that centuries of Christian art have told us. All the painters and sculptors unite to perpetuate the false notion that Jesus was wearing a loincloth on the cross. He had nothing of the kind. They took His clothes and cast lots for them. All His clothes. He was completely naked on the cross, naked and humiliated in front of a gloating, mocking crowd.

He did that for you. He prayed through the whole experience on the cross, and reiterates right here the request for God to hurry to His aid. He names His adversaries in reverse order: swords (wielded by evildoers), dogs, lions, and wild oxen, and He asks for God's help with each one of them.

Then comes His jubilant cry: You have answered me!

II. How I Will Respond When You Answer Me, vv. 22-31

The rest of the psalm talks, just like the previous one, about the king's joy in answered prayer. You want to see how greatly He exults when God grants the request of His lips? Then read this final third of Ps 22. You will hear an explosion of delight comparable to the climax in Romans 8. When God answers the king, the king bursts with sublime rapture.

A. Congregational Worship, vv. 22-26

The first words out of His mouth are "I have got to tell my church about this." He couldn't wait for testimony time, to get down to the local sanctuary and tell everyone what God had done for Him. Do you have that kind of joy in answered prayer? We begin our service with a prayer

request time; maybe I should emphasize that it is also an *answered prayer* time. The first thing Jesus Christ wants to do when He comes out of the tomb is to get to church and tell everyone about God's saving might.

Not only does He describe how God saved Him; He urges every God-fearer, every member of the seed of Jacob, to praise, to glorify, to stand in awe of the Almighty. If you are a believer, you need to be a worshiper. If you know that God delivered His Son from dogs and lions and evildoers, then you need to act on that knowledge by gathering with the church to sing praise to the God who did it. God heard when the king cried. That means that He will hear when you cry, if you are living in submission to the king.

The king also says something that sounds unbelievable — that God will praise Him in front of the great congregation. You can understand this like the NIV does — “From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows” (Psa 22:25 NIV). That can work — but it may be better to go with the bold and startling claim that just as Jesus leads the worship of His Father, so the Father leads us in worshipping Jesus. That is how highly exalted and honored your king is. He delivered Him, because He delighted in Him!

In case you missed the theme of the king's sacrifice resulting in worship, v. 26 repeats it again: through the sacrifice of Jesus, the afflicted get to eat. This is a metaphor referring to satisfaction, a reference to the Lord's Supper in which we eat the sacrificial feast that Jesus purchased for us through His death, and ultimately a reference to the coming Marriage Supper of the Lamb. Those who are presently afflicted, poor and needy, will someday sit down to feast in the kingdom of God. That is the good news that revives your heart and tells you that you will indeed live forever, nourished by the flesh and blood of the Son of God who was torn by evildoers so that you might have life.

B. Kingdom Worship, vv. 27-31

Well, the king continues to speak of worship, but now he explicitly relates it to the spread and triumph of the Kingdom of God. Thanks to the suffering and pain described in the first part of the psalm, the king will see all the nations submitting under his banner. The kingdom, God's rule, will be geographically unlimited. It will reach all the ends of the earth. It will also be ethnically-culturally unlimited, reaching to every family and nation. They will remember the sufferings of God's Anointed and they will turn to Yahweh in worship. Why? Because He is King. Ps 24 is going to explore this theme more fully with its declaration that the king who is worthy to ascend the hill of the LORD is Himself Yahweh Sabaoth. Because the king who was laid in the dust is also the king who rules the nations (thanks to His Father's gift, as Ps 2 tells us), all the ends and families of the earth will come under the dominion of Jesus Christ. Rich and poor alike, the prosperous and the one in the dust.

The kingdom will continue to flourish as a seed rises and progresses through the generations down to the end of time. This seed is elsewhere spoken of as God's elect, “all that the Father has given me” as Jesus put it. Our king is the seed of the woman, and we are His seed who serve Him.

We show that service by reading and singing and praying this psalm with our children and telling them “This is a prophecy written down by king David and fulfilled a thousand years later. He, Jesus Christ, has done it. He has literally done everything that this psalm describes. He gathers with us for worship every week, telling God’s name to us and describing how God rescued Him from dogs, lions, bulls, and evildoers. He has done it!”

Do you teach your children that? We have come a long way from “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But the reason that our king was forsaken was so that you and I could be rescued — and what more meaningful and worthwhile truth could we teach our children? They need to hear the king’s cry. They need to know this psalm, and come to love it, and even request to sing it every Sunday, because it shows us the sufferings of Christ and the worship that followed. Tell the people who are just born that He has done it. Amen.