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Introduction

Do we want God to change things or do we more want Him to be present with us? When we pray and ask God for something, do we ask Him to rescue us from our troubles or do we ask for his presence in the midst of our difficulties?

I know the answer to that for me – my prayer is usually first that God would change things. That He would step into my life and solve the problem. A bit like Bill Cosby's rendition of Noah's ark. Cosby tells the story about how Noah is loading the animals onto the ark, and God calls out to him: "Noah!" "What!" Noah says in a frustrated sort of way... God says: "You've got to take one of those hippos back and get another one." "What do you mean? Why do I gotta do that?" "Well you got two males there, you gotta take one back and get a female." A frustrated Noah replies: "I'm not doing that! You change one of them into a female!"

I'm a bit like that. I want God to often just fix it. I want to call down His power and change it all instantly and miraculously. And sometimes, He does! But Psalm 22 teaches us that our first desire needs to be for God Himself – for His presence. Not for what He can do for us, but for who He is. He's not the celestial santa claus, on whose knee we sit and ask for all the things we want and then off we go and wait for Him to deliver. Even in the midst of dire trouble, the Psalmist prays first for the nearness of God.

1. The writer.

So lets look at the Psalm from the writer's point of view. It is written by David, King David, one of the most famous figures in the OT. But he might be a king, but he is going through some massive difficulties. And when he is going through such tough times, David's first port in the storm of life is praying to His God.

But how do you pray to someone who seems to have abandoned you? How do you talk to someone who appears to have left you? Well according to David, you just talk to them anyway. But I want you to notice something about his prayer. In it he traces the cycle of emotion, how one minute, he is in deep despair and the next he is filled with hope. One minute he is down in the dumps, the next he is greatly encouraged.

That's the first lesson some of us need to learn. That what we feel, we feel, and God can take it. God can handle it. God is big enough. So don't edit your prayers. Don't protect God from your gripes and your grumbling. God wants your honesty. If you want his presence in the midst of your situation rather than wanting him to change your situation, you have to be real. And boy David is real in this Psalm isn't he?

(Psa 22:1 NIV) *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? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent.*

David feels abandoned by the Lord. David feels like his God has left Him. David feels like he is knocking on heaven's door but there is no one at home. And what makes it worse is that God has always been there in the past. In verse 3 he remembers that in the Bible God is described as the Holy One. He is worthy of our praise. God had come to the rescue of his people in the past, they cried out and God delivered them. They trusted Him and they weren't disappointed. So why has God left David now?

Well not only is he abandoned by his Lord, but he is despised by His people. He feels like a worm, he is not being treated like a human being. He is despised, mocked, insulted, abused, rejected. The people around him can see David's trust in God, but they also see that it is not getting him anywhere as well. He trust in the Lord, they sneer, let the Lord rescue him. If the Lord is strong enough, that is!

But if that isn't bad enough, he is also surrounded by his enemies. In verse 12 many bulls surround him. Lions are licking their lips and growling in readiness. Dogs are circling. Evil men are stalking him. People are already having a grab for his belongings, because it is pretty obvious, David is on his last legs. His strength has almost gone. His life is about to be poured out. His heart has given way. David is a Dead Man Walking. Or at least Dead Man Cowering.

Its not a pretty picture at all. And its painful to even read about it, let alone be there. But in the midst of this, David may be down, but he is not out. He may feel abandoned, but he is not without faith. Look again at verse 3, you are a holy God, and so I know that you will do right. Verse 4, you have helped out in the past Lord, so I know that you are still worthy of my trust.

For you did bring me out of the womb, says David in verse 9. You made me trust you even when I was on my mother's breast. You have always been there for me in the past. You have always been my God. And so I know that somehow, somehow you will come through for me in the present.

So he pleads with God in verse 19, please God don't walk away from me now. Please God give me the strength I need to handle all that I am going through. Please deliver my life from the sword. Please rescue me from my enemies. Save me, for in the midst of such trials and tribulations there is no where else that I can turn to for help!

And then something amazing happens. Its almost like the mention of God's salvation is enough to turn him around. Its like once he has reminded himself that God is a God who does rescue his people that is demeanour suddenly changes. His outlook immediately brightens. The storm clouds are still there, but He has caught a glimpse of the rainbow. And so suddenly his prayer is filled with praise.

v.22 I will declare your name to my brothers. In the congregation I will praise you. Has the situation changed or has his gaze been redirected? Has God stepped in and defeated his enemies, or has he been reminded that God is indeed with him, despite his feelings of loneliness? I don't know, the Psalm doesn't tell us. But whatever has happened has meant David has now down a full 180 degree turn. He is no long filled with fear, but consumed with faith.

So by the end of the psalm, David's tenor has changed. No longer is the psalmist groaning under a heavy burden, which he must bear alone. He no longer feels forsaken, or wonders why God does not answer his prayers.

God has moved. God has demonstrated His love, and power. God has answered David's prayers. David has rediscovered that God is like the cavalry in those classic American westerns. They always arrived in the nick of time. God is like that. He is never early, nor is God ever late. God is always right on time.

And so there appears within David's psalm an ever increasing circle of praise. Yes in verse 22 he will declare God's praise amongst his brothers. But then in verse 22, he will praise him amongst his countrymen, amongst all of God's people. Then in verse 27 this proclamation will extend to all the ends of the earth, for all the families of the nations will bow down and worship God because of what he has done. Even according to 30 and 31, even those not yet born, the future generations, will serve God and proclaim God's goodness and sing of His praises! The news of what God has done will travel to the ends of the earth and to the ends of time.

So this Psalm is important to David the writer. So important that when his contemporaries were looking for Psalms to sing in their Temple, they choose this Psalm. It showed them faith and fear can co-exist. That prayer is about honesty. That when we talk to God its not all about having our shopping list of what God should do for us and when God should it. It's about desiring God's presence. Its about reaching out to God in the dark and in the light. Its about remembering what God has done, recounting the fact that God has always been there in the past and it is about trusting in a God of salvation and telling others that our God is always worthy of that trust.

And that by itself would make this a remarkable Psalm. Except we have only explored just one of the layers of this deeply complex Psalm. For this Psalm is not just a song to be sung in the Temple by the OT believers. It is also a prophesy about what would happen to another King some 1000 years later. So lets move from the author to

2. The Fulfiller

For as we read the opening lines of this Psalm of David, we remember that we have heard these words somewhere before. For didn't Jesus, as he hung on the cross, with the weight of sins of the world, didn't he quote from this Psalm? Didn't he say in his moment of torment, "*My God, my God why have you forsaken me?*"

However, I do believe that by quoting verse 1 Jesus was really expressing the whole Psalm – you see we need to understand the context. In Jesus day they didn't memorize single verses, like we sometimes do today. They would have memorized entire passages and books, not single verses. And so when Jesus quotes the first verse of the Psalm, he actually is drawing attention to the whole Psalm. So lets go back to the beginning and see how Jesus actually fulfils the prophecy of Psalm 22.

My God, my God why have you forsaken me? Yes God did forsake his Son on the cross didn't he? Jesus did cry out to His Father God and didn't get an answer. He just got silence. Yes God had delivered his people in the past. Yes when the Israelites had

trusted in their Lord, they had never been disappointed. But now, now it seems so, so different for Jesus.

He is like a worm, he isn't been treated like a human being. He has been despised by his people, the chief priests had wanted his crucifixion and the crowds at the Passover festival had called for Barabbas to be delivered, not Jesus. They had voted for a murdered rather than a Saviour. And then he was mocked by the people around the cross, in fact they yelled these exact words, *he trusts in the Lord, lets see if the Lord will rescue him*. Lets see if God is going to step in to Jesus situation and get him down from that cross.

And yet right from the very beginning, right from the womb, God had been with Jesus. He had rescued him from Herod's murderous intentions. He had made him trust Him on his mother Mary's breast. And now the bulls, the lions, the dogs, the evil men had surrounded him. His hands and feet had been pierced. Why they even were dividing his garments at the foot of the cross. And they cast lots for his robe.

This is an absolutely amazing piece of prophecy, written 1,000 years before the death of Jesus. In fact it has been said that the Psalmist here gives a more vivid description of the sufferings of Christ on the Cross than do the Gospel writers. While the Gospels record the more apparent sufferings, this Psalm even records his more hidden sorrows. So this psalm has been called by some, "The Gospel according to David."

And what is even more amazing is that it describes what happens at a crucifixion so well, despite the fact that David had never been present at a crucifixion. In fact the Roman's only developed crucifixion as a form of corporate punishment some 850 years after David had written this Psalm. Yet he sees the tongue sicking to roof of his mouth, the strength sapping away from him, the piercing of the hand and the feet, the life being poured out before the yelling crowd. It is absolutely amazing the ability of this Psalm to describe what happened to Jesus.

For he too was abandoned by the Lord. Because on his body rested the sins of the world and God and sin can't mix. Apparently it was reported that Martin Luther sat contemplating the words of this Psalm and especially that of verse 1, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" After a long time he rose from his chair and exclaimed, "God forsaken of God! Who can understand that?"

The Psalm also describes how Jesus was despised by his people - the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the crowds. And the Psalm accurately portraits how he is surrounded by his enemies. And yet the cross leads to the crown. The prayer is replaced by the praise. For as a result of the cross and the resurrection people do proclaim God's praise amongst their brothers. The nation of Israel has heard about how great God is. And the news of the Lordship of Jesus has gone out into all the world. And future generations, including our very own have heard about the righteousness of God. About the cross and the crown. About how he never leaves his people.

A poem by William Stidger says it well:

*"I saw God bare his soul one day, Where all the earth might see
The stark and naked heart of him, On lonely Calvary.*

*There was a crimson sky of blood, And overhead a storm;
When lightning slit the clouds, and light engulfed his form.
Beyond the storm a rainbow lent, A light to every clod,
For on that cross mine eyes beheld, The naked soul of God. "*

But the meaning for the Psalm doesn't even end there. It goes from the author, to the fulfiller and onto **3. The Reader**, onto us.

For this is God's word and this word teaches us about the life of faith. It shows us how to cope when it seems like God has abandoned us. It is available to us when God seems close and when God seems far away. Why I read this week the story of a woman who was dying of cancer and so she asked her husband to read some of the Psalms for her as she lay in bed. Which ones? He asked. All of them she replied.

So he started reading, from Psalm 1 the two ways. On through to Psalm 8, a great Psalm of praise. Onto Psalm 19, how God is a Creator God and he got to Psalm 22 and thought to himself. This isn't such a nice Psalm I'll skip this one and go to that wonderful Psalm 23, the Lord is my shepherd. Which he did. But his wife spoke up, you missed one. And this is the one I really need.

You see we really need Psalms like 22. We need to express our pain, our disappointment with God. We need to continue to struggle with the highs and lows. We need to be honest with God. We need to pour out our soul and not ask for things of Him other than his presence. We need to change our shop lists worth of prayer and instead desire God Himself not what he can give us.

We need to find ourselves broken, broken before God, so that we can experience again his healing touch. It was American preacher Vance Havner who said, "God uses broken things. It takes broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume " But so often we are too self sufficient to be able to do God's will and this prayer shows one of the great saints, broken before God in prayer.

So the Psalm calls us to honesty before God. And it calls us to submission before God. All too often our problem is that we live in the here and now. We live in this moment. We want things to be the way we want them, now. Right now. We don't remember what God has done in the past, and so we don't trust him for the future.

This Psalm reminds us that Jesus has been where we have been too. When we feel the need to express our despair, frustration even, over God's apparent silence, we remember that Jesus felt that way also. He understands, He has been there.

This Psalm reminds us to look ahead. To know that God will hear, and God will answer. In the context of the song on David's lips, it appears that the answer comes immediately. But for Jesus, it was at most 3 days before the answer came. Maybe it is longer for you and I, but the point is that there will be an answer. God will come near again, He will save, He will forgive, He will deliver.

And lastly this Psalm reminds us of the need to praise God whether things are going our way or not. Praise him because he is in control. Praise him because he is present

with you even in your times of anguish. Praise Him because through his son Jesus, God does indeed understand what we are going through.

That reminds me of the story Corrie Ten Boom recounts in her book *The Hiding Place*, of the time she and her sister were forced to remove their clothes and stand naked during a typical Nazi inspection. Miss ten Boom said she stood there feeling defiled and forsaken. Then she remembered something. Jesus hung naked on the cross. Suddenly her emotion turned to wonder and worship when she thought of how He chose to do what they were forced to do. She leaned forward and whispered to her sister, "Betsie, they took His clothes, too." Betsie gasped and said, "Oh, Corrie, that's right, and I never thanked Him."

There are thousands of things that we have never thanked God for. And so when some of our nice things are taken away, we are reminded of our blessings, our many blessings given to us from the hand of a good God, that we have failed to recognise in the past.

So Psalm 22 helps us to see the faith of its author, King David. Its points to the faith of the fulfiller, our Lord Jesus Christ and encourages us the readers to have a similar faith and similar desire for both prayer and praise.

Let me end with a story, told by an old minister. He recounts, "When my son was small, we often walked together out through the fields and neighbouring pasture behind the parsonage. At first the little fellow would hold onto my little finger, but he found that when he stepped into a hoof-print or stumbled over something, his grip would fail and down he'd go in the dust or snow. Not giving it much thought, my mind on other matters, I'd stop and he'd get up, brush himself off, and grab my little finger again, gripping a little harder this time.

"Needless to say, this occurred frequently until one day as he was brushing himself off, he looked at me and said, 'Daddy?' I replied, 'Yes, Son, what is it?' He said, 'I think if you would hold my hand, I wouldn't fall.' The minister then recounted with a tear in his eye, "You know, he still stumbled many times after that, but he never hit the ground.

Now, as you walk with God, don't try to hold on to Him, let Him hold on to you. You may stumble but He'll never let you fall." For our God will always be there, even if at times he may seem absent!

Kid's Talk

Bobby Hill was an 8 year old boy in WW2 and he read that Dr Albert Schweitzer was in Africa doing medical experiments and little Bobby wanted to help in any way that he could. So he went to the pharmacy and bought a bottle of aspirin.

And he wrote a note, wrapped it around the bottle & mailed them to Lt. Gen Richard Lindsey, commanding officer of the Allied Forces in Southern Europe. This is what the note said *“General, if you planes are flying over Africa, could you please parachute these aspirin to Dr Schweitzer for me?”*

Gen. Lindsey opened the note, and was touched by what the boy had said. He told a few friends of the sweet note. Friends told friends and before you knew it a ground swell of support began to take shape.

By the time it was all said and done, the Italian air force flew four cargo planes with over \$400,000 worth of donated medical supplies to Dr Schweitzer. Dr. Schweitzer was floored at the response to a little note from a small boy and how others joined in to make it happen.

Now that should remind us of what is going on in the Church. You decide to do your bit for the work of the church. It may not be particularly big, but it's a contribution. And then others add their bits and others add their bit and then in the end what you have done to start things off is multiplied, many time over.

So work out what you can do for the Church and what you can do for others and then see where the Lord takes it!