

FROM GROANING TO PRAISE

SERIES: THE HEART OF THE PSALMS

By Scott Grant

The tigers come at night

In the musical *Les Misérables*, Fantine sings of her dreams, and of her hopes that “God would be forgiving.” But life changed her outlook:

*But the tigers come at night
With their voices soft as thunder
As they tear your hope apart
As they turn your dream to shame.
He slept a summer by my side
He filled my days with endless wonder
He took my childhood in his stride
But he was gone when autumn came.
And still I dream he'll come to me
That we will live the years together
But there are dreams that cannot be
And there are storms we cannot weather.
I had a dream my life would be
So different from this hell I'm living
So different now from what it seemed
Now life has killed the dream I dreamed. (1)*

Most of us who have believed in God have probably felt abandoned by him in some way at some time. Has life killed your dreams, or at least posed a serious threat? If so, you are ready to enter the biblical world of lament.

When we lament, we pour out our grief in God's presence, because we desperately need a new perspective. A lament is a grasping for the truth. We need to believe—we're trying to believe—that today is not forever, and that forever is good. As we authentically articulate our pain to God, we're accessing and opening our hearts. These are movements of faith, for we only open our hearts to someone we trust. Some might argue that this is an exercise in self-indulgence, but it is not. A lament does not wallow in pain but reaches out to God through pain.

Many of us in the church don't know how to lament, in some cases because we haven't given ourselves permission to do so. We think grief is something to be avoided or denied or to be moved through as quickly as possible. So we go through the motions of the spiritual life without truly opening our hearts to God, never feeling much passion because we've never allowed ourselves to feel much pain. And we can't authentically offer ourselves to others unless we're authentically offering ourselves to God.

Our hymn writers and songwriters don't help us much. They rarely lead us to lament, and when they do they usually interrupt us with a solution before we've spent our grief. Secular songwriters by and large do a better job with pain. At least they express it. A full third of the psalms, however, are either laments or incorporate elements of lament. Let us, therefore, learn from David, and from Psalm 22.

The psalm cannot be matched to any specific experience of David. But that doesn't mean that it's not based on actual experience. The language of poetry allows David to express his experience in ways that transcend the conventions of prose.

The superscription, which was a later addition to the inspired text, features a note to the choir director. This psalm was one of Israel's songs of worship. The expression of agony, in a rawness that even calls the Lord into question, was considered worship in the nation of Israel. When we pray such a prayer or write such a poem or sing such a song, we are worshiping our God.

Psalm 22 appears in three stanzas of roughly the same length, essentially creating a poem that comprises three thirds: verses 1-11, verses 12-21 and verses 22-31.

David tries to come to grips (22:1-10)

**My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?
Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning.
O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer;
 And by night, but I have no rest.
Yet You are holy,
 O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel.
In You our fathers trusted;
 They trusted and You delivered them.
To You they cried out and were delivered;
 In You they trusted and were not disappointed.
But I am a worm and not a man,
 A reproach of men and despised by the people.
All who see me sneer at me;
 They separate with the lip, they wag the head, saying,
"Commit yourself to the LORD; let Him deliver him;
 Let Him rescue him, because He delights in him."
Yet You are He who brought me forth from the womb;
 You made me trust when upon my mother's breasts.
Upon You I was cast from birth;
 You have been my God from my mother's womb.**

Verse 1 of the psalm captures the theme of the first two-thirds of the poem, verses 1 through 21. David feels forsaken by God. What's worse, he feels forsaken by his God, who had entered into relationship with him. Worse still, he doesn't know why his God has forsaken him. The Lord promised to be with his people, particularly his king, but David, the anointed king, finds himself doubting that promise.

David feels that the Lord has forsaken him, but David has not forsaken the Lord. He still calls the Lord “my God,” and he does so twice in the first line. He orients himself toward the Lord, and opens his heart to his God.

In the second line, David defines what he means by the word “forsaken.” He means that his God has not delivered him. It was expected that the Lord would deliver his king (Psalms 18:50, 20:6). David groans—literally, he roars—but his deliverance remains distant. The words “my God, my God” are mirrored by “my deliverance” and “my groaning.” David expected his God to hear his groans and to grant his deliverance, but from where he stands, the Lord has abandoned him.

In verse 2 David adds perpetual cries to his roars, but he hears nothing from the Lord, who has not granted him the rest from his enemies that he expected (2 Samuel 7:1, 11). After questioning the Lord’s commitment to him, David reminds himself that the Lord himself is beyond question. Despite his predicament, David believes, yes, that his God is “holy,” which means, among other things, that he is faithful to his promises. The wording in Hebrew makes this an emphatic statement. David is working out the paradox in his mind: He is trying to bridge the chasm between the silence of the Lord and the holiness of the Lord.

His God is the Holy One of Israel (2 Kings 19:22). Perhaps the nation as a whole is responsible for the silence of his God, but David understands the Lord to be “enthroned upon the praises of Israel” regardless of the nation’s shortcomings. David remembers that God delivered Israel’s fathers when they trusted in him and cried out to him. David uses the words “my God” three times in verses 1 and 2 and the word “trusted” three times in verses 3 through 5. David is saying that the Lord is his God as much as he was the ancestors’ God. So, David wonders, what makes his plight different?

The problem isn’t with the Lord. The problem isn’t with Israel. Perhaps, David thinks, the problem is with him. Verses 3 through 5 began with the words “yet you,” in reference to God. Verses 6 through 7 begin with the words “but I,” in reference to David. The Lord is holy; he has not forsaken the people of Israel. Why has the Lord forsaken David? Perhaps it’s because David isn’t even a man: “But I am a worm and not a man.”

He sees himself as a subhuman and despised creature that is not worthy of the Lord’s attention. The people of Israel make him feel this way. They despise him, reject him and mock him, both with words and gestures. They add insult to injury by suggesting that the Lord would deliver David if he trusted in him.

In verse 9, David again employs the words “yet you,” in reference to the Lord. In verses 3 through 5, these words introduced a section that highlighted the Lord’s care for Israel. Now, they introduce a section that highlights the Lord’s care for David himself.

He goes back to the beginning—his own beginning. Infants were extremely vulnerable in the ancient world, yet the Lord, the divine midwife, brought forth David from the womb. David trusted—in his mother, but ultimately in the Lord—when he was born. As an infant, David had no choice in the matter, so he sees the Lord as having created this trust. David was not only brought forth by the Lord, he was “cast from birth” into the hands of the Lord. If the Lord had not caught him and nurtured him, he would not have survived more than a few hours.

At the beginning of the psalm, David called the Lord “my God.” Now, he says that the Lord has been “my God from my mother’s womb.” Not only is the Lord David’s God, he has always been David’s God. If his God brought him forth from the womb, why doesn’t the Lord bring him forth from this present crisis? If his God caught him when he was cast upon him at birth, why doesn’t the Lord catch him now as he casts himself upon him once again?

Petition 1: ‘Be near’ (22:11)

**Be not far from me, for trouble is near;
For there is none to help.**

In verse 1, David expressed hopelessness. The Lord had forsaken him, and for the next 9 verses David wrestled to come to grips with it. In verse 11, he petitions the Lord for the first time. Remembering the nearness of his God at birth leads David to ask, “Be not far from me.” The Lord’s absence has been filled by “trouble,” which is “near.”

David began with a question to “my God” and the contention that deliverance was “far” from him. A third of the way through the psalm, David echoes the beginning, but with remembrances of “my God” and an appeal for the Lord to be not “far” from him. All, apparently, is not lost—at least not yet. Nevertheless, his God is his only hope, for there is none to help.

Approaching your God

You feel forsaken by the Lord—that he has failed to deliver you in some way. You have roared and cried, but you’ve heard nothing from God and found no rest. You also probably can’t help wondering why he has forsaken you. Who’s to blame? You? Someone else? The Lord? You’re haunted by such questions.

In the scriptures, the Lord promises to be with you. But now, you must admit, it seems like an empty promise. The apparent contradiction between the Lord’s promise to be with you and your experience of life is tearing you apart. What do you do now? You do what David did. You approach your God.

Yes, the Lord is still your God. Don’t forsake the Lord, even if it seems as if he has forsaken you. Try to find words for what you feel, and speak them to your God. When you form words, what you’re really doing is unlocking your heart. You’re releasing the confusion, despair and anger that you’ve imprisoned there.

In releasing your emotions, you may be shocked by their intensity. In presenting them to your God, you may then expect him to punish you or withdraw from you. What you don’t expect is for the Lord to accept your words, and the emotions that give them shape, for what they are: worship. The Lord wants worshipers who trust him enough to approach him with all that is in their hearts no matter what is in their hearts. But, in presenting your words to the Lord, don’t just complain. Seek to bridge the chasm between your feelings of abandonment and his supposed faithfulness, between the silence of the Lord and the holiness of the Lord.

As you stand on your side of the chasm, you will no doubt notice that the Lord has delivered others. You will then wonder, “What makes me so different that the Lord has not answered my prayers?” Maybe, you think, it’s your fault. You wonder if something about you makes you unworthy of the Lord’s attention. To feel abandoned by the Lord, who promises to be with those who put their trust in him, is to feel less than human, maybe even like a worm. The words and gestures of others, whether intentional or not, make you feel this way. Some, adding insult to injury, have suggested that God would deliver you if you just had more faith. You feel despised, rejected and mocked.

You need to go back to the beginning—your own beginning. You were born. The divine midwife brought you into the world. He must have had a reason for doing so. However, the present crisis feels like a womb you need to be drawn out of, and you wonder, “Where is the divine midwife now?”

You’ve been afraid lately to appeal to your God for his nearness for you’re not sure you can trust him. You’ve been afraid to ask for deliverance, lest you get disappointed again. But after releasing your confusion, despair and anger in his presence, you begin to hope that he can be trusted with at least a meager prayer for deliverance. After all, you’re desperate, and he is your only hope. Desperation is often the beginning of faith.

David lays out his plight (22:12-18)

**Many bulls have surrounded me;
Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled me.
They open wide their mouth at me,
As a ravening and a roaring lion.
I am poured out like water,
And all my bones are out of joint;
My heart is like wax;
It is melted within me.
My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
And my tongue cleaves to my jaws;
And You lay me in the dust of death.
For dogs have surrounded me;
A band of evildoers has encompassed me;
They pierced my hands and my feet.
I can count all my bones.
They look, they stare at me;
They divide my garments among them,
And for my clothing they cast lots.**

In verses 12 through 18, David describes his plight, which he has only hinted at up to this point. Even in these verses, specifics are elusive because of the poetic nature of the language. He compares his enemies to beasts. Humanity was supposed to rule over the animal kingdom, but now the Lord’s anointed king is depicted as being at the mercy of ferocious beasts. In the book of Daniel, humanity in opposition to the Lord is seen in the images of mutant beasts.

David's enemies are like bulls, even strong bulls of Bashan, a region that was known for its well-fed cattle. These powerful opponents have encircled him and left him without escape. They are together like a ravenous, open-mouthed lion ready to devour its prey. A lion, with its roar, stakes claim to its victim against any would-be competitors. David has been "roaring" to the Lord (verse 1). First, the distance of the Lord is bridged by the nearness of David's enemies. Now the silence of the Lord, in the face of David's roars, is magnified by the roars of his enemies.

Verses 14 and 15 depict David's response. He feels that life is being emptied from his body; his skeletal structure is unable to function. A heart that has melted like wax before a flame is one without courage. His strength has evaporated, and he's as useless as a worn-out pottery fragment. He even has difficulty speaking because of his anxiety.

Apart from the Lord's deliverance, David assumes that his God is laying him in the "dust of death." The Lord formed the first man, the king of the Eden, from dust, and now the king of Israel is returning to the dust from which Adam was formed and to which Adam returned (Genesis 3:19).

In verse 16 David again paints the picture of being surrounded by animals—this time he calls them dogs—and he for the first time acknowledges their humanity, calling them "a band of evildoers." In that these men have pierced his hands and feet, they are in a position to do whatever they want to him. Furthermore, David's food supply has been cut off, so he's nothing but flesh and bones. His enemies are depicted as vultures that await his death so that they can scavenge his clothing.

Petition 2: 'Deliver me' (22:19-21)

**But You, O LORD, be not far off;
O You my help, hasten to my assistance.
Deliver my soul from the sword,
My only life from the power of the dog.
Save me from the lion's mouth;
From the horns of the wild oxen You answer me.**

If David was trying to come to grips with his plight in verses 1 through 10, he's describing the desperation of his plight in verses 12 through 18. He managed to eke out a petition for deliverance in verse 11 that echoed verse 1. In verses 19 through 21, he offers up another petition for deliverance. It also echoes verse 1, but it's even more poignant in light of the agony depicted in verses 12 through 18. This petition is also more personal, more specific and more expansive.

In verse 11 David wrote, "Be not far from me." Now he makes the plea even more directly and emphatically: "But you, O Lord, be not far off." In verse 11 he wrote that "there is none to help." Now, in asking for assistance, he identifies the Lord himself not as "my God" but as "my help." David's only hope for help is in his God's deliverance. He has nowhere else to turn.

David incorporates the metaphoric description of his plight into his petitions, asking for deliverance from the dog, lion and wild oxen. He asks not only that the Lord deliver him but also that he deliver his "soul" and, literally, his "only." All he has left is his soul. His predicament could hardly be more dire, yet an amazing turnaround occurs at very end of this petition: "From the horns of wild oxen you answer

me.” This is no longer the language of petition. This is the language of assertion. David believes that his God has heard him and will answer him. David will unveil the answer he expects in the amazing final stanza.

Articulating your desperation

You expected to be able to manage your life, but your life has managed you. Someone, or something, is against you. You’ve had to struggle against some powerful beasts, so to speak. Sometimes you can name them, sometimes not. You expected to rule over them, but they have ruled over you. The beasts seem closer to you than the Lord, and they’re making a lot more noise.

The bulls are strong, and the lions are hungry. They have pinned you down, and you’re at their mercy. But the tigers come at night, with their voices soft as thunder, as they tear your hope apart, as they turn your dream to shame.

As the beasts close in, you feel that something is being drained from you—passion, hope, maybe life itself. Your body and health, which you could previously depend on, may even fail you. Your courage has melted away, and your strength has evaporated. You feel useless for any good purpose, because it takes all your courage and strength just to face another day. The anxiety you feel even restricts your ability to speak.

Life, it seems, is a purposeless cycle. It doesn’t seem to be going anywhere, at least anywhere good. You live; you die; so what? You throw up your hands and ask, “What’s the point?” With the onset of depression, eating has become an issue. You eat all the time, or not at all. With certain kinds of eating disorders, you may find yourself counting all your bones while others stare in disbelief. There is more profit it seems in your absence than your presence, maybe even in your death than in your life. You wonder if others would be better off with you out of the way.

You have tried to come to grips with your plight in order to bridge the chasm between your feelings of abandonment and the Lord’s supposed faithfulness. After doing so, you trusted the Lord with a meager prayer for deliverance. That led you to feel and articulate the desperation of your plight. In all of this, something has happened. You’ve moved. Not physically, but emotionally. You’re in a different place than when you began addressing the Lord, and when you petitioned him earlier. You’re ready to trust the Lord with more of your heart.

You pray for deliverance again, but in a different way. It’s more personal, as you begin, “But you, O Lord.” It’s more specific, as you lay your request before the Lord. It’s more expansive, as words multiply into sentences. You know this, having felt it and expressed it: All you have left is your soul, and the Lord is your help. Having emptied your soul, you sense that your God has heard you.

David explodes with praise (22:22-31)

**I will tell of Your name to my brethren;
In the midst of the assembly I will praise You.
You who fear the LORD, praise Him;
All you descendants of Jacob, glorify Him,
And stand in awe of Him, all you descendants of Israel,**

**For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted;
Nor has He hidden His face from him;
But when he cried to Him for help, He heard.
From You comes my praise in the great assembly;
I shall pay my vows before those who fear Him.
The afflicted will eat and be satisfied;
Those who seek Him will praise the LORD.
Let your heart live forever!
All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD,
And all the families of the nations will worship before You.
For the kingdom is the LORD'S
And He rules over the nations.
All the prosperous of the earth will eat and worship,
All those who go down to the dust will bow before Him,
Even he who cannot keep his soul alive.
Posterity will serve Him;
It will be told of the Lord to the coming generation.
They will come and will declare His righteousness
To a people who will be born, that He has performed it.**

The final stanza represents an abrupt change in the psalm, although it was hinted at in the last word of the previous stanza. The laments and petitions of the first two stanzas give way to an explosion of praise.

David now envisions praising the God that moments ago he accused of forsaking him. Such praise will be uttered in the midst of the assembly of Israel as it gathers to worship in the temple. Moreover, David exhorts his countrymen to join him in praise and even to “stand in awe” of the Lord. Such a response on the part of the assembly would drown out the voices of the mockers (verses 6 to 8).

The reason for such praise is the Lord’s response to David’s cry. In verse 24 David talks of himself in the third person and thereby offers hope to other sufferers. If the Lord has heard David, who is identified among the “afflicted,” perhaps he will be favorably inclined toward other righteous sufferers. The people despised David, but the Lord has not despised him (verse 6). He felt forsaken by his God, but now the Lord has not hidden his face. David understands that the Lord has heard his cry. Having poured out his grief, David has received from the Lord a new vision.

David says that his praise comes “from” the Lord. The Lord, through his response to David, has created this inclination for praise. “My groaning” of verse 1 has become “my praise” in verse 25. David envisions fulfilling a vow he made to God, evidently in his distress, by offering a sacrifice and sponsoring a communal feast for the “afflicted,” which undoubtedly would have included the poor (Leviticus 7:16, Deuteronomy 12:17-19). The Lord provides for Israel, as he did in days of old, but this time through the one who felt disconnected from the nation (verses 3 through 8).

In verse 23 David encouraged his countrymen to praise the Lord; in verse 26 he expresses confidence that they will do so. When David says, “Let your heart live forever,” he may be hinting at eternal life, but mostly he’s strengthening the hearts of the afflicted who seek and praise the Lord. And this from one who was on the verge of death and whose heart was like wax!

David's vision moves beyond Israel to the nations in verse 27. He expects all the ends of the earth to "remember and turn to the Lord." It's as if there's something of the Lord, the one true God, in the memory of the pagan nations that needs to be triggered. The psalm began with one lonely individual crying out to his God for deliverance; it is concluding with all the ends of the earth and all the families of the nations joining David and Israel in worshiping the Lord.

The reason given in verse 28 for such a response is the Lord's sovereignty over the nations. David expects the Lord to demonstrate his rule in such a way that the nations worship him.

The inclusive nature of such worship is illustrated by the presence of the prosperous, who will "eat and worship," along with the "afflicted," who will "eat and be satisfied" (verse 26). The prosperous are also contrasted with, but eventually include, "all those who go down to the dust" and "he who cannot keep his soul alive." The strong and the weak will worship, as will the dying, which finally includes everyone. There may be the suggestion that the final destiny of the dying, those who go down to the dust, is not, in fact, death. After all, the author of this psalm thought that his God was laying him in the "dust of death," but the Lord has heard his cry.

The word "posterity" (literally, "seed") in verse 30 is the same word that is used of the "descendants" of Israel in verse 23. Having gazed at the world's distant future, David scales back his vision to Israel and to its near future. The future of the nations begins with Israel's future. The Israelite worshipers of the Lord will tell the next generation about him. They will speak of the Lord's righteousness—his faithfulness to his covenant promises.

Literally, they will say that the Lord has "done." Done what? Acted in righteousness, which must feature, in the context of this psalm, the deliverance for which the king cried. It is not a deliverance that has happened yet, as David pens this psalm, but a deliverance that he confidently expects. The tension in the psalm, which began with the Lord's distance in verse 1, is finally resolved with his anticipated deliverance in the last word of the last verse: "done."

The Lord's deliverance of his king will be incorporated into the story of redemption that is carried to the next generation of Israel and eventually to the ends of the earth. The one who saw no future for himself now sees his future as being bound together with the future of humanity.

God gives you a new vision

You've emptied your heart of grief and prayers; you feel that your God has heard you. Now he answers you—not, at first, by granting you the deliverance you prayed for but by giving you a new vision. This is the power of lament, and one of its great mysteries. Great visions are birthed when all hope is lost but hope in the Lord. The lament expands the borders of what's possible. You anticipate, and even begin, exploding with praise for the God who supposedly abandoned you. You know this is not the kind of praise you could have generated yourself. The Lord has created it. He gives you the gift you need most: the gift of praising him.

Your suffering isolated you. It disconnected you from God's people. You felt as if you alone were suffering in your particular way. You felt you couldn't share your ordeal with others. It was your own private misery. But now you know that you must share your story. Others need to hear it and praise the

Lord for it. You know it is not enough to worship the Lord alone. Now, far from separating you from others, your suffering binds you to them. You sense a kinship with other sufferers, and a responsibility to offer them hope. You had no strength, but now the Lord strengthens you so that you may strengthen your brothers and sisters.

Your vision begins to expand to distant lands and a distant future, when men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and nation will worship the Lord in the renewed creation. Personal pain has given birth to global vision. You know that you and your worshiping community are a chapter as the great human story builds to its climax. So you want to be faithful, and you want your church to be faithful. You want it to impart faith in Jesus to the next generation.

No longer do you need the kind of deliverance you prayed for, though the Lord may grant it. With a new perspective, you know that this path through the valley of the shadow of death leads to the mountain of the light of God. There are deaths, but there will be a resurrection. With your new perspective, and in advance of that day, you can say: “The Lord has done it. He has delivered me, and he will deliver me.”

And your story will be added to the eternal book. You have a limitless future that’s bound together with worshipers from all generations. It begins when you tell someone else what the Lord has done for you.

The Jesus pattern

David’s psalm, you see, is your psalm. But before it became your psalm it became Jesus’ psalm. Psalm 22 is quoted, or alluded to, 24 times in the New Testament, 17 times in connection with the crucifixion of Jesus.

As the bulls encircled him and the lions bore their teeth, Jesus cried out to the Father, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” The Son of God joined the company of the afflicted and united with our suffering. In so doing, he endorses Psalm 22 and gives it to us. When we lament, we’re following Jesus’ pattern. We’re being his people. And he’s lamenting with us, just as he wept with Mary of Bethany (John 11:35).

Did God deliver his Son? Indeed he did. When? Not until after Jesus was dead. For Jesus, the third stanza of Psalm 22 is about his resurrection. When we lament in the manner of Psalm 22, we emerge with a redefinition of what we expect of God prior to our own resurrection. We praise him because he is with us and will raise us from the dead to be with Jesus and his people. We will all stand up in the eternal assembly, and we will tell our stories and read our poems of the great things God has done for us.

The gospel is what triggers the nations’ memory of God. When the story is told of the life, death, resurrection and reign of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit accompanies it with power. It accesses something deep, maybe something subconscious, in the hearts of those who hear it. The gospel summons the world to bow down to Jesus.

A better dream

In bringing our pain before God, we make ourselves accessible to his compassion. When the cup has been emptied, it can be filled with something else. God gives us a new perspective.

I remember one night in my 20s, sitting alone on some bleachers in the midst of a prolonged depression, pouring out my heart to my God. Without warning, he gave me a new vision in which I was bound together with a brother in Christ. I had known the man, but now I understood that I could know him better, that I could identify with him, and he with me. The vision came to pass, in a limited sort of way. I have since come to understand that the brother in my vision represented more than himself. He stood for a multitude of fellow sufferers who I have connected with in the last 20-plus years.

The tigers come at night. But we come to the Lord.

NOTES

(1) Alain Boublil and Herbert Kretzner, *I Dreamed a Dream*, © 1985 Exalshow Ltd., © 1987 Relativity Records Inc.

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Psalm 22

3rd Message

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