

Psalm 22 – Psalms series

It's my privilege to bring the message from Scripture today. I want to thank Reverend Grant for the invitation to share this morning.

Pray

Have you ever been on a roller coaster? I love them. They are scary and exhilarating at the same time. Here in the Netherlands I've been on most of the roller coaster rides at Wallabi Word and Efteling – I love the speed, the ups and plunging downs, the wild corners and the buzz it leaves you with at the end.

Today we continue our series on the psalms and prayer with a look at Psalm 22 which has been described as a roller coaster psalm – highs and lows and unexpected twists and turns.

Our Psalm reading today is from the second part of Psalm 22 – it is a beautiful expression of praise and worship to the Lord God Almighty.

What reasons are given for worship?

- V 24 – God is not one who ignores the suffering or hides from the afflicted
- V 26 – God is the one who cares and provides for the poor
- V 27 – God is the one who is Lord over all the nations of the earth
- V 31 – God is the one who has the final victory – the psalmist proclaims triumphantly at the end of the psalm: He has done it!!

These are bold statements that God is Lord over all creation, over Israel, and over all the nations and is worthy of all praise and worship. These declarations sound as though they are coming from someone who is experiencing the full blessing of God and has complete trust and confidence in God.

Yet when we look at the beginning of Psalm 22 we see it starts with deep lament expressing significant suffering and distress.

How can a psalm that starts with an expression of absolute abandonment by God end with worship of God and God's Lordship? I think a part of the key to understanding this psalm's move from despair to praise, is to read it as a dialogue of prayer with God, a journey of faith.

This roller coaster psalm starts with a deep plunge downwards opening with: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* You understand immediately that they are deeply distressed. This cry of distress and abandonment is repeated by Jesus as he hung on the Cross suffering intensely for our sake. I confess there have been times in my life when I have prayed similar words. I imagine there are some of you who have also uttered similar words. Suffering is real, pain is real, feeling abandoned by God is real and its okay to express this to God.

Then in verse 3 of the psalm the first twist in the roller coaster happens and a counter prayer is uttered: *Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One... In you our ancestors put their trust.* The psalmist reflects on God's faithfulness in the past as a means to encourage trust in God in the present. Remembering in the Old Testament is usually meant to encourage faithfulness and motivate trust.

Tanya Marlow, a woman who has endured years of physical illness writes this:

Trusting means looking to God, relying on him and his goodness, even when the situation is not as we hoped or wanted. Trusting means loving him and rejoicing in him, even when we don't understand.... Trusting means hanging on when God is silent.

As we journey through Lent our thoughts turn to Jesus in relation to his own suffering. This is an important perspective on praying in tough times. In his suffering Jesus enters fully into the suffering that we as humans sometimes face. But suffering and death were not the end of the story. Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended glorified to sit at the right hand of the Father. It is this very Jesus who is with us, strengthens us, and in whom we put our trust. Jesus promised his followers in Matt 28.20: *...surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.* Often there are no easy answers and yet we have this promise – that Christ is with us.

Remembering God's faithfulness and promises of his presence in prayer are a powerful antidote to times of distress and feelings of abandonment – it helps build the trust we all need to persevere.

Then just as suddenly the next plunge of the roller coaster occurs. In v6 the psalmist declares – *But I am a worm and not a man.* Feelings of self-doubt and pity gain a foothold. This is what intense illness or troubles can cause isn't it – feelings of worthlessness.

In verse 9 another twist happens in the prayer as the psalmist confesses that God “*brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you.*” Their life has been shaped by God and for God. The psalmist challenges their own feeling of worthlessness by acknowledging that their life has value because God has created and sustained them.

- During times of self-doubt and feeling worthless it is good to remember that in Christ we are a person of worth, created and loved by God. How do we know this? It is the reason Jesus came to earth, was willing to endure suffering on the Cross – Jesus did this out of love.
- Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 2.10: *For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...*
- When we rest in the truth that God loves us and values us, we can lift our hearts to God in worship and praise challenging the lie that we are worthless.

In verses 12-18 takes another twist with a long lament calling out to God in the face of oppression and attack by enemies. The gospel writer Matthew notes the connection between this section of the psalm and Jesus’s own suffering on the cross, his pierced hands and feet, and the way in which his clothes were gambled over by the soldiers at the foot of the cross. We are reminded again of Jesus’ own suffering for our sake.

But yet again the dialogue of prayer takes another turn in v19: *But you oh Lord, do not be far from me. You are my strength...deliver... rescue me...* The psalmist now expresses expectancy and hope that God will strengthen them in their weakness to face their terrible situation. Hope is such a powerful force in our faith.

- In Rom 4.18 from our Epistle reading today we heard Paul write about the faith of Abraham and the hope that he had despite the long wait for the promises: *Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed...*
- In Hebrews 6.19 the writer highlights the power of hope that comes through Christ writing: *We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.*
- There is a power that hope brings to sustain and strengthen us in difficult situations

It is this dialogue of prayer that shifts the psalmist. As each plunge into despair happens counter prayers are made that lift their eyes above their situation. It is through this repeated wrestling with God in prayer that the psalmist encounters the God who may appear silent but who is indeed present.

This has been my experience as well. We came to The Netherlands back in 2007 to serve God with the mission organisation I still serve with, trusting in the confirmations that we believe God gave us. Yet our permit application was rejected and we received a get out of the country in 28 days letter. We appealed. We lost that appeal and got another get out of the country letter. We started another process and finally received our first permit - a one-year permit. Obviously in the end we found a way through. However, this whole process took five years and then another 5 years before we had a secure permit. During this time there were many ups and downs. Moments of breakthrough and moments of defeat. But it was five years of uncertainty and doubts, five years of wondering where God was in this. Five years of trying to trust God and not feel abandoned. It was a long process for me of dialoguing and yes, wrestling with God.

I have found and still find prayer difficult. However, as a part of my own dialogue with God I have come to catch a glimpse of how to pray as the psalmist prays: prayers that remember God's faithfulness, prayers where I am reminded to trust that God loves and values me, and to pray with hope that God will strengthen me to endure.

I believe it is these counter prayers, these wrestling prayers that allow the psalmist to be transformed and to transcend their suffering and burst into worship and praise in verse 22 – *I will declare your name to my people, in the assembly I will praise you*. From the isolation at the start of the psalm the psalmist is now standing among God's people encouraging them in worship.

The second half of the psalm turns into the beautiful expression of praise and worship of God as Lord of all that we looked at earlier. It is important to realise that the psalmist does not arrive at this point without praying through their situation in dialogue with God – this is key to understanding prayer as a part of our faith journey. It is worship that is hard won and birthed by real struggle and honesty.

The psalm concludes and so does this message with the picture of the nations bowing down and worshipping the Lord proclaiming God's glory. The final words are: *He has done it!* Jesus echoes these words with his final words on the Cross: *It is finished!* Both are a declaration that God will accomplish God's own purposes. At the end of the Bible, the book of Revelation gives us a similar picture of the nations worshipping the risen Christ and God bringing all things to completion. Revelation was written to encourage God's people in their suffering. It is through Jesus's death on the Cross, his resurrection, and ascension that there is hope for you and me, and the nations. God has done it. It is this glorious vision given to encourage us and move us to worship and praise.

Whatever our situation – in our joys and struggles may we be encouraged in our prayers to remember God's faithfulness, to rejoice in God's love for us in Christ, and to set the hope of Jesus in our hearts. May we hold on to this vision of God's final victory. May these move us to worship and praise our God who is present with us and indeed Lord of all.

Pray