

Pain & Suffering

Well great to see you guys this morning. If you have a bible, go with me to Psalm 22. Today we are continuing on in a series titled *All the Feels*. It's a series all about how we understand and process different emotions experiences, using the Psalms for help along the way. And today, on the docket is to talk about *pain and suffering*. And immediately, some of you who didn't know that was coming are like "how can I sneak out of this room without anybody noticing?" Nope, you're stuck here now. There's windows everywhere—we'll literally stare you down as you leave.

But in all seriousness, this is the teaching that *nobody* really wants to sit through. But ironically, it is probably the talk that all of us *need* to sit through. **We need this teaching because suffering either has come or will come for all of us at some point.** I am positive that's not what any of us wanted to hear today, but it's true nonetheless. Pain and suffering will come for every one of us. Either it will happen to you, or it will happen to someone very close to you. Some of us know that all too *well*: for some of us, our story is marked by one tragedy after another. Others of us have not had to experience much suffering at all first-hand as of *yet*, but we most likely will—that's the bitter truth about life on planet earth.

I mentioned briefly at the end of the teaching a couple weeks ago that suffering has been very embedded in the life of our church family, almost from the very beginning until very recently. Just in 2018, we had multiple families experience miscarriages, a guy in my LifeGroup's dad was diagnosed with stage IV brain cancer, and then a member of our church family, Sean Brereton, pass away suddenly and unexpectedly at 31 years old, leaving behind his wife and four-week old son. So then we rounded the corner into 2019, thinking to ourselves, "okay, it can't possibly get *worse*." And then it kind of did. Just a few days into the new year, one of our pastors and one of my best friends in the world, Jeff, and his wife Callie had just completed a multiple year journey to become adoptive parents. They had been matched with a birth mom and had just taken the baby home from the hospital, when they got a call from the adoption agency saying that the birth mom had changed her mind. So in some ways, the past year or so for our church family has sort of just felt like one bad thing after another.

So all that to say, we as your pastors obviously feel a tremendous responsibility to lead all of us well through pain & suffering. ~~I also mentioned a couple weeks ago that when we put this series on the calendar over a year ago, we had no idea how timely it would be for us in light of everything that would happen. We had no idea that God was preparing us for, but he did. What I didn't mention a couple of weeks ago, because I had forgotten it, was that it was actually Sean himself—the member of our church family who passed away—that suggested doing this series when we're doing it. When we were planning, Jeff and I were considering delaying this series, because we just felt like it would be too similar to the series right before it on prayer, but Sean was in that meeting and said "no, I think we need to do this series on the Psalms right where it is."~~ So And in a whole lot of different ways, this series just feels like it has God's timing all over it. So I'm praying and believing this morning that God is going to meet us right where we're at. *So if you don't mind, I'd love to pray to that end.*

So let's take a look at Psalm 22. This Psalm is what's called a psalm of *lament*. *Lament* is the word for an vocalized expression of pain or grief. And what's interesting is that of all 150 Psalms in the bible, **lament is the most common type of Psalm.** *Two thirds* of the Psalms are psalms of lament. They're made of

up God's people crying out to God about things in their lives that aren't okay. So let's see how David, our author, does it. Starting off in v. 1:

[1] "My God, my God, **why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?** [2] O my God, I cry by day, but **you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.**

So right off the bat, David dives straight into one of the most gut-wrenching, heart-breaking experiences of a relationship with God: the times where we cry out to God, and it seems like there is no answer. The times when it seems like we are stuck in the midst of our pain and suffering with no apparent response from God to it.

But I want you to notice what David *does* with that experience: he talks about it directly *with God*. **He's hurting, he's confused, he feels abandoned—but he takes all of that directly to God because he knows the relationship can handle it.** And in fact, what's interesting to me is that the Psalm, for the most part, is just David describing in vivid detail how his suffering *feels*. That's interesting to me because it's very different than how I tend to pray when I'm suffering. When I'm suffering, I tend to mainly ask God to *do* something about what's happening to me. He spends very little time *in* this Psalm asking God to *do something* about his suffering: "God help," "God move," "God fix this," "God heal." I assume God already knows how I *feel*, so I spend most of my time telling him what I want him to *do*. And that's fine to do, but I do want you to see that's precisely the *opposite* of what David does here. He assumes God already knows what to do, and so he spends most of his energy telling God exactly how his suffering *feels*. Truth be told, there are only three verses out of 31 that make a request of God. The rest is just **David processing his hurt with God.**

A lot of us don't take the time to do this with our hurt. I think a lot of us handle our hurt with God like we handle *any* type of interpersonal conflict. By default, the American way to deal anytime we have beef with somebody is that we just simmer in our frustration, we mostly ignore the person we're frustrated at—or at least keep all conversations with them at a superficial, surface level—and then eventually we just ghost on them. We pull away from relationship with them because there's too much there to work through. And that's a whole teaching in itself for *another* day about how we deal with conflict. But I can't help but think that is *shockingly similar* to what so many people do with God. In their hurt and their pain they become frustrated with God like most anyone would, but then they just *simmer* in their frustration. They either completely avoid talking to him about it, or they just keep all conversations with him at a surface, religious-y level and never bring up their frustrations—until eventually the hurt and the pain has built up for so long that they just walk away from relationship with him completely. I can't tell you as a pastor how many times I've seen that exact situation play out.

But I want you to see in this passage that David *refuses* to do that. He comes *at* God with some intense, borderline *blasphemous* accusations. But he does all of that *within the context of the relationship itself*. David knows that **deep meaningful relationships occur—not in the avoidance of conflict—but by working directly through it.** That's true of relationships with human beings, and it's true of God too. So he doesn't just *simmer* in his frustration. He takes his frustration to prayer and prays: "God, why have you forsaken me?" That's how David responds to his pain.

Next, let's read a larger chunk of the passage and then we'll go back and point some things out, v. 3:

[3] **Yet you are holy**, enthroned on the praises of Israel. [4] In you **our fathers trusted; they trusted**, and you delivered **them**. [5] To you **they cried** and were **rescued**; in you **they trusted** and were **not put to shame**. [6] But I am a **worm** and **not a man**, **scorned** by mankind and **despised** by the people. [7] All who see me **mock me**; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; [8] "**He trusts in the Lord**; let **him** deliver him; let **him** rescue him, for **he** delights in him!" [9] **Yet you are he who took me from the womb**; you made me trust you at my **mother's breasts**. [10] On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God. [11] **Be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help**.

So for David, here's one of the toughest things about his suffering: **it feels so at odds with who he knows God to be**. As he suffers, he says "but God, you are holy. Our *ancestors* trusted you and you rescued *them*. They cried out to you and you *did something* about *their* suffering." He knows God is a god who answers prayer and rescues his people. But that doesn't make him feel any better. If anything, it makes *his* situation all the worse. Look at v. 6: "but I am a *worm*, and *not a man*. I feel *less than human* right now, like you surely doesn't care for me at all the way you cared for *all them*." And then he bounces right back again to his own personal story with God: "but you delivered me from the womb, you cared for me when I was a child and were gentle and tender towards me." Essentially, God you cared for *me then*—why doesn't it *seem* like you care for me now? Can you feel the *tension* in this passage? Can you feel this turbulent back-and-forth between what he knows to be *true* about God, and what he is currently *experiencing*? **He just oscillates, back and forth, between what his current experiences seem to be telling him about God, and what he knows to be true about God.**

And I think most of us who have followed Jesus for any length of time have been in a place like this. I was very much in this place just a few weeks ago, here one Sunday at the Gathering. We were all here together, and we were singing the song *King of My Heart*. And there's this part of that song where it just repeats over and over again: "you're never gonna let, never gonna let, never gonna let me down." And I love that line—I think it's so true and so good for us to sing. And yet, at the same time, we were singing it just a week or two after the Hsiang's adoption had fallen through. And I'm singing these words and I'll be real with you guys: it literally *stung* physically in my chest to sing those words. Because I'm singing "you're never gonna let me down," and at the same time I'm looking at that situation and going "I don't know, God—it sure does feel like you let them down." My bet is that a lot of us have experienced something like that. **Whether it's when we're singing a song, or reading a passage of Scripture, or just in our daily thought life, I think we've all been in a place where what we're experiencing in life just seems so at odds with what we know to be true about God.** Maybe even with what we've seen God do in the past for us and other people. That's where David is in this passage.

So listen—if you're a follower of Jesus and you're honest with yourself, *you will encounter* times like this. And when you do, the Psalms want you to know you're in good company. You experiencing seasons like that doesn't mean you're not a Christian, it doesn't mean you're not doing it right. In fact, it *might* mean you *are* doing it right. And God in his grace gave us this book of prayers where many of them are people experiencing very *similar* things to what you're experiencing. And part of the reason they're there is so we might know that we're not alone in it.

But he goes on, v. 12:

*[12] Many **bulls** encompass me; **strong bulls of Bashan** surround me; [13] they open wide their mouths at me, **like a ravening and roaring lion.***

Some of you are like, “wait a second—there are bulls and lions involved? This passage just went from fairly applicable to my life to...*jungle safari*?” Okay, I get how that could be confusing. Here’s what’s happening: in David’s culture, bulls and lions were considered to be the most powerful, *unpredictable* creatures there were. Which honestly, I tend to agree with—have you guys ever seen the videos from the *Running of the Bulls* in Spain? That is terrifying to me. I think powerful and unpredictable is probably a spot-on description of bulls. So this is David’s way of saying that the circumstances in his life—the suffering he’s dealing with—feels far too powerful and unpredictable for him. Everything about his life seems chaotic and out of control. He feels like there’s no ability to predict or handle what might happen to him next. Like things are just spiralling out of control with no end in sight.

So when you pastor a church, one of the things you just start to learn is that anytime you get a phone call from somebody in your church after 10:00pm or so—chances are it’s not good. So when we got the call about Jeff and Callie it was around 11:00pm. When we got the call about Sean it was actually around 3:00am. So something I’ve noticed about myself lately is that I now dread anytime I hear my phone buzz after 10:00pm. Like just hearing that sound can set my mind to spiraling. So I guess what I’m saying is that if you want to make my life miserable, just call me sometime after 10:00pm, hang up, and don’t leave a voicemail. But the thing is that so many bad things have happened in a row, that it’s like I’m just waiting anxiously for where the next one is gonna come from. I know many of you have been in similar seasons—where it just seems like so many bad things are happening, that any day something else is going to hit, and there’s nothing you can do to predict it or prepare for it. This is the wall of suffering David feels like he’s up against.

Keep reading, where David begins describing how his suffering is even taking a toll on him even *physiologically*, v. 14:

*[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 strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; **you lay me in the dust of death.***

So David is describing the type of suffering that crushes you, *physically*. It puts you in this place where you feel like you have nothing left in you. It’s exhaustion at a *soul* level. Every day you wake up and you’re immediately tired, no matter how much sleep you got. And David is saying that it feels like God has just left him there *in* that place. Continuing on in v. 16:

*[16] For dogs encompass me; **a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet—** [17] I can count all my bones— they stare and gloat over me; [18] **they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.***

So not only is David suffering, the people around him are making it worse. The contrast here is that he is in the worst pain *of his life*, and **not only do other people around him not care that he’s in pain, they are the ones responsible for it.** He says, “they pierce my hands and feet,” “they cast lots for my clothing.” Casting lots was an ancient game of chance, sort of like rolling dice or flipping a coin. As he

lies there *inches from death*, the people around him are playing a game to decide who gets to keep his stuff once he's gone. It's this depiction of total disregard for his pain.

Now maybe you and I haven't had that *precise* experience, where we're in anguish and someone is gambling over our clothes—that's pretty specific. If you have, that's dark. But many of us probably *have* been in a place where **we are suffering, and it seems like nobody else notices or cares. Like we are in one of the hardest seasons of our life, and everybody else is just going about their business, proceeding on with life as usual—maybe even inadvertently saying or doing things that make what we're going through even more difficult.** And that experience right there can make the suffering so *much worse*, can it not? To feel like you are *alone* in your pain? To feel like there is no one willing to enter into the midst of our suffering and say "I see you, I know that you're suffering, and I'm here to help." It's *amazing* how *helpful* and *life-giving* words like that can be when they happen. And inversely, how incredibly *difficult* it is when those words are nowhere to be found. And it's out of *that* place that the Psalmist utters his final request of the Psalm—v. 19:

[19] But you, O Lord, do not be far off! O you my help, come quickly to my aid! [20] Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog! [21] Save me from the mouth of the lion! You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!

So this is the space that David finds himself in. Pretty dark, right? So for today, we're going to stop right there at v. 21. Not because the rest of the Psalm isn't important, but because I think it's important that we talk about a couple things this Psalm gives us in the midst of our pain and our suffering. There are at least two things it gives us that might be helpful. One is fairly obvious and the other one a little less so.

A Freedom to Grieve

First, I think in our pain, **this Psalm gives us a freedom to grieve thoroughly and completely.** Think again with me about how bluntly and openly David talks about his pain in this passage. He divulges it in gritty, almost *uncomfortable* detail: "Why have you forsaken me?" "Why are you *so far* from saving me?" "God, you lay me in the dust of death." Let's be honest: most of us who have been in church long read stuff like that in the Psalms and go "now, now David. We mustn't speak that way to God." Like, how often have you felt the *freedom* that David apparently feels, to pray things as bluntly as that to God?

I'll be real with you guys—I don't think *I* have felt that type of freedom in prayer until very recently. I've been following Jesus for about ten years now, only recently have I felt the freedom to pray things like that. So like I told you earlier, the past year in a lot of ways has just been brutal for our church family. And in the couple weeks after everything happened with Sean and then with Jeff and Callie, I did something I don't do much: I *journalled*. I'm not much of a journaler in general. I know a lot of you guys have like entire shelves of your journals from throughout the years, but that's just never been much of a thing for me. But in the weeks after everything happened, I journalled. I think part of it was because I felt like all these thoughts were just swirling around in my head and I needed to get them out in a concrete way. So I sat down and began to write, and here's what came out. And I'll just warn you, it might make you a little uncomfortable, especially if you like to think that pastors have it all together:

God, why do you keep beating us down? How come it feels like every time some people in our church return to life as usual, a hand grenade goes off in another corner of our church family? Will we somehow be a better church if we all end up as shells of who we are because of suffering? How are we going to tell people in Knoxville about who you are if all we can do is wake up the next morning and not be struck by the next big catastrophe? It feels like every bit of energy we could devote to loving and following you gets drained immediately by tragedy. Which direction is the next one coming from, God? How bad is it going to get? Maybe if I can anticipate what it is, at least I won't be completely knocked out by it. God I know you care for us and I know you're with us. I know you do not abandon your people. But it sure would help if it felt like that a little more often lately.

Some of you are like “man, that’s dark.” Yeah. I was honestly kind of shocked when it came out on paper. And it was because of that, that I wrestled so much with whether to share that with you guys or not. I wanted to, but at the same time I was like “is our church going to like force me into therapy if I read this?” But I think even *that* hesitancy in me reveals how much my relationship to God *hasn't* been shaped by the Psalms. Because here’s what I’ll tell you: those words right there are *mild* compared to some of the things said in the Psalms. Like that’s J.V. level compared to some of the things in this book. And if I hadn’t been already spending time in the Psalms (thanks to prepping for this series), I don’t think I would felt the *freedom* to put that down on paper. But because of the Psalms, because I had *these* examples of honest prayers from the bible, I felt the freedom to pray things very similar.

~~In fact, as I started working my way back over those words I wrote, I realized that ideas and concepts from the Psalms were throughout it. I realized as I combed back through what I wrote that so much of the mind and the imagination of the Psalms had been internalized in my soul. And doing that made me feel so much more able to pray those things in the midst of my own pain, back to God.~~ **The psalms give us freedom to grieve.** Listen: if you don’t hear us say anything else in this series, hear us say this: prayer is a place where you can be honest. Prayer is not a place to pretend you have it all together. God knows that you don’t. And because he knows, he gives you the freedom to grieve, because the relationship can handle it.

A Savior Who Knows

But here’s **what’s so incredible about the Psalms: they give us freedom to grieve, they also don’t leave us there. They give us someone to identify with in that pain.** There is perhaps no singular psalm in the bible that more clearly points to Jesus than this one. So Matthew 27 is one of the chapters in the bible where we get the details of Jesus’ death on the cross. And I want to put some selected passages from Matthew 27 on the screen. And all I’ve done is placed the Matthew 27 passages together with their references to Psalm 22. Take a look on the screen:

Psalm 22:7-8: All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; “He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!”

Matthew 27:39, 43: And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads, and saying [...] [43] “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him...”

Psalm 22:18: they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

Matthew 27:35: *And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots.*

Psalm 22:1: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

Matthew 27:46: *And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

There are actually several more parallels between the two. But **what is *unmistakable already* is that both Jesus and Matthew see what is happening to Jesus on the cross through the lenses and language of Psalm 22.** In their minds, Jesus was experiencing many of the same things David experienced. And catch this: Jesus *himself* is so familiar with the language and emotions of Psalm 22 that he uses its opening line *verbatim* as he cries out from the cross. So **David had no idea about this when he was processing his own pain and suffering, but years later there would come a savior who would experience the same things he experienced.** In fact, **what Jesus would experience would be so *similar* that the bible would use David's own words to describe it.**

So here's what that means for us: if there's one thing we can say with confidence about Jesus in the midst of our pain, it's that he *knows*. He very much knows what it feels like to suffer—apparently down to pretty eerily specific detail. The author of Hebrews picks up on this idea when he says this:

*For it was **fitting** that **he**, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, **should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.***

For followers of Jesus, I think one of the most difficult things about suffering is the fear that we are alone *in it*. Like we have been *forgotten about* and *abandoned* in our suffering. That's the fear David has, right? "God, *why have you forsaken me?*" But it's actually precisely *because* Jesus suffered that we can know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that we will never be *forgotten about* in *our* suffering. **Because Jesus *truly* was forsaken, we get to know as followers of Jesus that we never *will be*.** It was his death on the cross that meant you and I have a companion in our suffering that knows exactly how we feel, and can respond accordingly. // And you know, I would argue that short of having a complete *end* to our suffering, having someone with us in it who knows what we're feeling is about the next best thing.

Some of you guys know that when we started City Church, we came from another church much like ours in Columbia, SC. We still have a great relationship with the pastors at that church, and I was reminded of that a couple weeks ago when I got a text, out of the blue, from one of the pastors there. So they know all about the past year that we've been through here, and so I just got a text from one of them that said "how are you holding up man? I know you've been spending a lot of time being with others in their suffering, but I bet you haven't spent much time talking about how you're doing." And what was crazy is that just that simple text brought me to tears. Like the floodgates of my eyeballs just opened up out of nowhere. And here's the thing—there was nothing unbelievably profound about that text. It didn't contain any life-changing insights or truths. It didn't change anything about how difficult the season we're in is.

But you know what it said to me? It told me that somebody *knew*. Not only is he a pastor like I'm a pastor, but he also has been through seasons where *he* wasn't suffering first-hand, but one of his best friends in the world who was also a pastor on staff there *was* suffering. He also had dealt with unexpected deaths of people in his congregation who were far too young to die. And so when he said "how are you holding

up,” it just carried so much weight. Because it communicated “I know, and I’m with you.” What was funny is that I had had plenty of other people ask me similar things, and while it was helpful and I’m glad they asked it, it just didn’t mean the same thing. But when *he asked it*, it meant so much. Because I knew that he *knew*.

In a far more profound way, that is what Psalm 22 and Matthew 27 are telling us. They’re telling us that we can know that *He knows*. This side of heaven, we may not know *why* we suffer. We may not know the precise reasons for why things that happened, happened. But we *can know* that in the midst of our pain, in the midst of our suffering, that he knows what it *feels* like. And he stands ready to hear all of our cries: the pleasant ones, the angry ones, the confused ones, the nonsensical ones—even the borderline *blasphemous* ones like David’s. And everything else that comes with it. Because he *knows*. So when we suffer—and all of us will at some point—we can pour every bit of that hurt out before Jesus and know that we will not be abandoned. We will not be forgotten about. Because *he was*, we can know we *never will be*.

So here’s what I want to do to wrap up. I know that in a room this size there are probably plenty of us who are currently suffering. And I don’t know that there’s anything I or we can say that will make that go away, but what we can do is remind you that Jesus is with you, and communicate that we too are with you.

So as a way of doing that, in just a moment I’m going to ask that if you’re here and you’re currently suffering in any way—big or small—that you stand up. Now I do want to warn you, if you stand up, I am going to ask that a few people huddle around you, and place a hand gently on your shoulder, arm, or back, and pray for you. I warn you about that because I know that some of you might not enjoy that part of it or be comfortable with it. So total freedom to not stand up if you don’t want that to happen. You can just stay put, and rest assured that the prayer applies to you whether the physical contact happens or not. But if you do, us placing a hand on you is our way of saying that we know suffering can be incredibly isolating, and we with everything in us don’t want you to be isolated.

So that being said, if you’re suffering and are cool with that happening, why don’t you go ahead and stand. If you’re hurting, if you’re suffering, go ahead and stand. And as that happens, I’d love it if our City Church members, LifeGroup leaders, our leaders-in-training, or just anybody sitting near them would just go and place a hand on their shoulder, their arm—whatever works. Maybe do your best not to suffocate them with people on all sides, but just a handful of people per each person standing. And as that happens, I’ll just lead us in praying over and for that person.

Now, before everybody sits down, I want to go ahead and ask everyone in the room to stand. Now, if you’re one of the people who is hurting, here’s what I want you to do: look around you. To your left, your right, in front of you, behind you. All around you are people who desire to walk through the season you’re in with you. 1 Corinthians 12:26 says that “when one part of the body suffers, the rest of the body suffers with it.” And part of why we are here at City Church is to do exactly that. It may be that you’re not ready to have other people walk with you through your suffering, and that’s fine. But I want you to know that what you’re looking at right now is a picture of the people who are ready to whenever you’re ready.