



Second Sunday of Advent
December 4, 2016
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Send Us Your Light: The Abandoned

Psalm 22

Advent is the season of preparation for Christmas, a season of darkness before the dawn. This Advent we are praying our way from darkness to light with the help of the Psalms. Last week David taught us to pray as we wait, Psalm 13: "How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever." This second weekend of Advent, David teaches us another prayer in the darkness: the prayer of the abandoned.

If you have ever been abandoned will you nod your head? One of my LifeGroup members told me this week, "There is no more powerful emotion than abandonment." He would know; listen to part of his story. "My father left us 4 times over a period of 12 years. I would wake up in the morning, and he would be gone. Abandoned! My mother struggled emotionally and financially, and her coping mechanism was alcohol and pain medication. Although I saw her every day, I felt abandoned. During my junior year in college, she passed away. Abandoned! And later, after 30 years of marriage, my wife left me and my kids. Abandoned once again."

I had a small taste of it myself when I was in Scotland. My girlfriend left the university just before Christmas 1985, and I was devastated. I remember being literally the only person in my residence hall; everyone else was gone for the holiday. I sat by myself in the Common Room on Christmas Day watching "It's a Wonderful Life" and thinking, "No, it's really not." I have never felt lonelier.

No one knew abandonment more acutely than Jesus. When he was on the cross, as the sin of the world came crushing down upon him, he screamed out what has come to be known as his "Cry of Dereliction." And this familiar cry is a prayer taken right from Psalm 22. In fact, Psalm 22 is known as the Psalm of the Cross. If you listen carefully, you will not believe how vividly it describes details of the crucifixion of Jesus—something that would not occur for another 1000 years! This type of psalm is called "lament." Listen to the lament of the Son of God feeling forsaken by his Father.

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

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. 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!"

Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God. Be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help.

Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and 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 my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.

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

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The heartbreaking cry of King David at some broken point in his life. The heartbreaking cry Jesus on the cross. And, for many of us, our own heartbreaking cry of abandonment. This is painful lament.

So when we are feeling forsaken by God, how do we pray our way into the light? I want to suggest one word: Remember. This psalm teaches us to remember.

First, remember God's faithfulness to others. The psalm opens with that painful cry of dereliction: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

If you could imagine a roller coaster, this is as low as you go. Abandoned by God, groaning in pain, crying out day and night. receiving no answer. Finally we come to the bottom, and slowly start back up with one sweet word in verse 3: "Yet..."

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

Notice, David isn't at a point where he can remember God's faithfulness to him. He is so wrapped up in his pain and disappointment with God that nothing in his life

seems good, but he can at least remember God's faithfulness to others. He can say, "I feel abandoned by you... but I remember that you were faithful to our fathers. They cried out and you rescued them. They trusted you and you came through for them."

This is tribute to the importance of church. It is why we need each other. If in our times of lament we are alone, then we have no perspective—no alternate story, no one to whom we can point and say, "But wait... they still believe. They went through hard times and God was faithful to them." It is why we need LifeGroups. Sooner or later, every one of you will take a turn on the hot seat where you feel abandoned by God. But you are surrounded in that moment of crisis by others who can give you hope.

This is particularly why young people need a church that isn't just full of folks their age. A twenty-year-old hasn't lived long enough to experience God's faithfulness in the ups and downs of life. When they hit their first down, they don't have a long enough span to offer any hopeful perspective. That's why a twenty-year-old needs a 60-year-old in his life—someone who can say, "It's okay, son! I know you are in the pits right now, but it will get better. God is faithful. I know because he was faithful to me when I was 20!"

So he gets a glimpse of hope by remembering God's faithfulness to others, but pretty soon, he is back down into the pits again: Verse 6.

But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people.

All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;

Back to the depths. If David lived here he might have said, "I am no more than a slug! A slimy, low-life. All people want to do is pour salt on me and watch me shrivel."

But this time, he starts back up the other side a little quicker. He remembered God's faithfulness to others, and now he remembers that God has, in fact, been faithful to him, too. Again, it starts with that wonderful word, "Yet." I'm a worm, I'm a slug.

Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God.

Do you see what I mean? After he primed his memory banks with the help of other people's testimony, he remembers, "Wait a second, I have a testimony, too! God has been faithful to me, too! From the beginning! I must remember this!"

When we think God has abandoned us, the best way to denounce this lie is to look to the evidence of our own past. Talk to your soul. "Soul, do you remember when God did this? And this? And this? And when you were in that situation, remember how he came through then, too?" They say that the best predictor of future behavior is past performance. God's faithfulness to others—and his faithfulness to you in past—is the best promise that he is not done being faithful, even in a time of abandonment.

And finally, this: Remember that God has not yet written the second half of your psalm. We read only the first half of Psalm 22. It's called the "lament" section. When we think of Jesus on the cross, it is the first half we remember because the prophetic parallels are so obvious. But tradition has it that Jesus prayed the whole psalm while on the cross. And the second half of the psalm moves from dereliction to celebration. Listen:

*I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
You who fear the LORD, praise him! ... For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him....*

As I said, tradition has it that Jesus prayed this entire psalm on the cross. The lament of the first half, yes. But the second half as well. The half that reveals a God who has not abandoned him, after all! Did you hear that part? Verse 24: "For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him."

I believe that Jesus prayed all of Psalm 22 as he hung on the cross—the lament part, yes—but I think he finished the prayer. Maybe under his breath. Maybe his pain made it too hard for him to be heard. But I have one piece of evidence to suggest that he got all the way to the end of the psalm. Want to see that evidence? It is in the last two verses. Listen to 30-31:

"Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it."

Do you see those last four words? I was so excited when I discovered this. The ESV reads, "...he has done it." But in Hebrew, there is no pronoun. Do you know what the literal translation of the last four words is? "It is finished!"

What were the last words of Jesus on the cross? "It is finished!" "My work of salvation, my atoning death for the sin of the world which caused my father to turn away from me for a moment—it is finished!"

We start with the words of Christ's abandonment: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." But it doesn't end there! It ends with Jesus's cry of victory: "It is finished!"

When you feel abandoned by God, when you cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" you must remember that the second half of your psalm has not yet been written. That last, triumphant part. One day, your faithful Christ will turn your present cries of dereliction into shouts of hallelujah!

I started my sermon with my friend's lament; remember? He was abandoned by his father four times, abandoned by his mother, abandoned by his wife—but would you listen to the second half of his psalm? Here's what he wrote: "'My God, My God why have you forsaken me?' Psalm 22 begins with David feeling abandoned and in the depths of despair. Yet God never left him, He didn't forsake him and in the end David's story is one of redemption. In the end David's story is my story. My wife of 8 years loves me, my family loves me, my church loves me, my pastor loves me, and most of all my God loves me."

Indeed, he does! When the devil whispers, "Forsaken!" the Spirit shouts back: "Remember the faithfulness of God!"

This table is about remembering. Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." If you are in a place of abandonment, here is your moment to remember your faithful God. And as we come to the table, let me read from Psalm 22, verse 26:

The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD!

May your hearts live forever!

Let us eat and remember, and be satisfied.