

SERMON TITLE- "The Psalms Of Lament"

TEXT- Psalm 22

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Last week we looked at a category of Psalms that was challenging to deal with from the perspective of the average modern person. These were the Royal Psalms. While we do understand that God is the King of Kings, we actually don't even really know what a king is.

And yet, the Royal Psalms remind us that God is the foundation of everything we do. This perspective helps us find our orientation as we respond to our leaders today- whether they are leaders of government or work.

It is however a perspective that does take some thoughtfulness to make the necessary connections.

Today however we look at a category of Psalms that we really can understand. These are the Psalms of Lament. Laments are something we can understand. We even have a whole genre of contemporary music focused on laments. That music is the blues.

And of course, blues are part of every music style.

Here's an example of such a lament called "The Worried Man" by Johnny Cash

**Worried man worried man I'm a weary worried man
Hungry babies don't understand papa is a worried man**

**The place I used to draw my pay slammed the door on me
today**

**And told me just to stay away and no come back again
I went back home to bring the news my woman saw that I
had the blues**

**But she said the babies need new shoes and I'm a worried
man**

Worried man worried man...

So why are the blues part of our make-up as people?

#1. Tough things happen and we need to face them.

I believe that one of the mechanisms God has given people, to deal with hard things, are expressions of grief. When sadness or pain

rolls over us, we are inclined to cry. God did not make us as versions of Star Trek's Dr Spock.

The inclination to cry when confronted with sadness or pain is not something that the followers of Jesus somehow move beyond. The best reminder of this is the number of times Jesus cried.

The Bible verse that every kid of my generation knew well, is the shortest verse in the Bible- "Jesus wept." John 11:35 This was in response to the death of His good friend, Lazarus, and Jesus is on His way to raise him from the dead. Surely Jesus wouldn't need to cry over that.

But Jesus did and it seems to me that it was in response to the grief of the world that He did. Even though Lazarus would be raised, Jesus knew that the sadness of the world would not disappear with that miracle.

We need to sing the blues because-

#2. Talking about them can be healing.

There is something deeply healing and sustaining about being able to share our sufferings. One of the things that our cancer journey has done is put us into contact with a very specific group of people in pain.

When they hear our story and when we here their something healing takes place. Paul takes about it in these words-

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings . . . Philippians 3:10

I believe all of us have experienced what it means to have shared a painful journey with someone else- and how especially when looking back, we are bonded in a "fellowship" that strengthens and heals us.

In our own journey I am constantly overwhelmed by the blessing of the support we get. I have been struck by the fact that while as Kingdom people we are not given a ticket past the suffering of the world, we are told to build a community of people who will walk with each other through these difficult places.

We cannot share in each other's sufferings if we don't share our suffering.

The Psalmist models for us that we can and must put our pain out there for the community to see.

So it should not be a surprise that the Bible has its blues. Today we are going to look at the Lament Psalms and through Psalm 22. This Psalm takes us on a journey of lament- a journey that we need to note-

Psalm 22 For the director of music. To the tune of "The Doe of the Morning." A psalm of David.

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. Psalm 22:1-2

This is a good Psalm to use for a couple of reasons. First, it is the Psalm that Jesus quoted as His last word before He died.

. . . at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" . . . With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. Mark 15:34-37

There is a cry of pure pain in Jesus' word that He takes from Psalm 22. It is a cry that millions have joined in and hearing it from the lips of Jesus is comforting.

So what do we learn here?

#1. Just Say It!

The Psalms are full of beautiful poetry. The blues that we listen to also have something in their phrasing that is evocative and beautiful. That is why these writings survive and are repeated again and again.

But there is a problem when we come to equate beautiful words with our own sufferings. When we are in pain we rarely are able to come up with memorable lines worthy of a song or poem.

But the cry of Jesus is something that we can connect with. This is first and foremost a simple cry from the heart. It is a big "Ouch!"

In fact the whole of Psalm 22 paints a picture of Jesus deepest suffering- on the cross.

And the Psalmist, who was honest in his grief, makes the next observation-

All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: "He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him." . . .

I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me.

They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing. Psalm 22:7-18

You may recognize this as the description of Jesus' crucifixion. This was the taunt that was thrown in Jesus' face, as He hung on the cross.

Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!"

In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. Matthew 27:39-41

Wow! That is the ultimate taunt and one for which there is no retort. We serve the God who loves us and tells us to call on Him in days of trouble. Now we are in trouble- and where is He?

Getting the cries of our hearts out there where they can be heard is the first step forwards.

Not every Psalm of lament begins with such a hard hitting opening but the point of getting our pain out is very important.

Of course the pain we face is seldom in the same range as Jesus' but there is something in the common cry that joins our hearts.

It is only when we put our pain out there that the fellowship of suffering can be tapped into. We may not blurt it out the way this Psalm does but until we finally do so- we cannot receive the blessing of a Godly lament.

But the Biblical laments are not just the fellowship of suffering. Like everything Biblical, there is a balance. The blues and other laments can begin to sound like ends in themselves. Not so with the laments in the Psalms. Here they are one part of a balanced Scriptural diet.

If we were to divide the Scriptures by flavour, there is no question about what they would be. The laments are the bitter piece of the scriptures.

It is their place in the spectrum that takes them from being mere laments to the real gifts to the spiritual health of God's people.

The foundational piece to all Scripture, as we noted last week is the place of God. And the laments are all clear in this-

Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel.

In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.

They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed. Psalm 22:3-5

This defines the Biblical lament.

#2. The Background Flavor- God's Love

The bitterness of what is happening to the writer comes against the backdrop of God, who loves His people. When you listen to the blues, even the song that we used as an example- there is generally sadness without a larger context.

Not so, the Biblical lament. God is enthroned. He was the object of Israel's worship. He has saved His people in the past and they **"were not disappointed"** in Him.

At first this makes the suffering worse. You can hear that in the Psalmist voice when he talks about how God has answered the prayers of the previous generations.

It begs the question- why do I suffered then, when I call out to God? If God is God, and He loves us, why are we under this dark and terrible shadow? That is the question that the suffering person wrestles with.

And the Psalmist answers his own question-

But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. Psalm 22:6

This is the Psalmist's first answer to a puzzle that believers in a good God wrestle with. The puzzle is- something called theodicy- the study of the question-

#3. Why Do I Still Feel Terrible?

The puzzle is problem of pain and evil. If God is good and created everything, where does pain and evil come from?

All kinds of complex answers have been attempted for this puzzle but I have yet to hear one that made any sense to a person in pain.

Answers that make sense in books and sermons seldom translate well into the life of a person overwhelmed by suffering. When life closes in around us the conclusion that makes the most sense is- we must be nothing. Other people are rescued by God. Our ancestors of course told us stories of God's work in their lives- but obviously I am too insignificant to matter. I must be a repulsive worm that is only worth grinding underfoot.

And as a person who talked about God and His provision- I am now even more pathetic. It is one thing to be a nothing but a nothing that once made great claims is even more pathetic. Those to whom I previously made great claims to are now truly disdainful.

That is a tough question- but unless we are prepared to ask it there is no way to come to the Biblical blessing.

There are times when we wish we didn't have to face the really tough questions. And thankfully most of our lives are not lived in the shadow of them.

But there are times when we do feel alone with our pain and with nowhere to go.

We can comfort ourselves with various illusions but that is not the Biblical way- and it is not the way that the Biblical lament sends us.

Instead the Psalmist goes back to his foundation-

Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast. From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. Psalm 22:9-11

#4. God Loves Us- We Are Not Worms

We do feel like meaningless worms in the face of pain and suffering for which there is no relief. That pain is heightened when it is placed against the backdrop of a God who loves us, wants us to pray to Him, and yet seems to ignore our cries.

But even in His despair the Psalmist reminds himself of a fact that has been driven into his being from birth. He is a child of the living God in a deep and specifically personal way.

The personal God and His personal relationship to each of us is a core belief that goes hand in hand with the existence of a Creator.

I believe that every human being has a sense that they are individually important. I believe that this comes from our creation as beings made in the image of God.

But I also believe that systematically and persistently teaching this to our children is our first mandate. Each human being is a special creation and knowledge of that fact demands that we treat them as such.

When we pray with that knowledge our prayers have the pathos and realism of the Psalms of lament.

That alone gives us a perspective and even a healing as part of the “fellowship of suffering.”

When this is understood, we cry out to the God who loves us just as a child cries out to their parents. They quickly learn that crying out to one’s parent does not automatically take away the pain- but there is a blessing and comfort in having a parent here you and care.

That knowledge that we have a God who loves us is very important- just as it is important for children to know that they are loved by their parents.

The world is divided into those who know that God loves them- and those who don’t know this. This is a distinction that matters a great deal.

The Psalms of lament may be bitter but even in that they are part of the flavour of a Biblical diet- but this means knowing that God loves us.

So is being a servant of God simply a matter of getting comfort- and that’s all? If it were, that would still be very good.

But there another very important piece. It may not give an answer to the question of why, does give us a big picture context that we do need.

Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord.

They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn— for he has done it. Psalm 22:30-31

#5. We Are Part Of The Big Picture

The ancient people of God lived with a deep sense that life was more than the moment.

The idea that life is only about the moment is an idea that has particular power today. If the moment is all there is, a hard moment is really hard.

But if the moment is not all there is- one can often gather strength. There are times of suffering that don’t have a foreseeable end in sight. When goes to the dentist the pain is supposed to be temporary- when one gets older there is a realization that the aches and pains are not just temporary.

So what does one do when faced with pain that does not have a quick end?

The Psalms of lament very specifically answer that question. These Psalms direct us to the big picture- it is the picture of God’s grand story.

There are times when the chapter and moment that we are in is very difficult but God’s people never end with that. We are part of a much bigger picture.

This is why the Psalms of lament do focus on the great acts of God from the past. This is not just about nostalgia- it is a reminder that some day someone will be able to look back on our stories and see the great hand of God at work.

The Psalms of lament are the bitter flavour of the diet of God’s people. No one likes that flavour all alone- but when that flavour is mixed into the diet in the balance that the Psalms give- not only is that flavour not so terrible- the nutrients that are contained in that spiritual food give us strength and courage when the challenging seasons come.

The Rest of Psalm 22

- 12 Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.**
- 13 Roaring lions tearing their prey
open their mouths wide against me.**
- 14 I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me.**
- 15 My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;**

you lay me [b] in the dust of death.
16 Dogs have surrounded me;
a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced [c] my hands and my feet.
17 I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me.
18 They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing.
19 But you, O LORD, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me.
20 Deliver my life from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dogs.
21 Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save [d] me from the horns of the wild oxen.
22 I will declare your name to my brothers;
in the congregation I will praise you.
23 You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
24 For he has not despised or disdained
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.
25 From you comes the theme of my praise in the great
assembly;
before those who fear you [e] will I fulfill my vows.
26 The poor will eat and be satisfied;
they who seek the LORD will praise him—
may your hearts live forever!
27 All the ends of the earth
will remember and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
will bow down before him,
28 for dominion belongs to the LORD
and he rules over the nations.
29 All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—
those who cannot keep themselves alive.
30 Posterity will serve him;

future generations will be told about the Lord.
31 They will proclaim his righteousness
to a people yet unborn—
for he has done it.