

From Dusk to Dawn: Good Friday Message | Psalm 22
The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican
Preaching Draft | April 18, 2025

Once, having returned on an overnight flight from two weeks of international travel, I took a midday nap. I fell into such a deep sleep, and slept for so long, that when I woke up it was barely light outside. And I was so jet-lagged, and disoriented, that taking in the dim light, I didn't know whether it was dusk, or dawn.

I could tell it was mostly dark outside. But I didn't know if it was the beginning of night, or the beginning of morning.

Not all darkness is the same. Dusk is darkness overcoming light. Dawn, however, is darkness being overcome by light. Applied as a **metaphor** to our lives, when in seasons of darkness, a lot changes if we believe things will get brighter rather than darker.

The Psalmist in Psalm 22 is being engulfed by darkness, and darkness of the worst kind: *Godforsakeness*. "My God, my God, why have you **forsaken** me" (22:1) are the chilling words he opens with.

To be **forsaken** is to be abandoned by someone or something, and at a time of need. The Psalms are aware many things may forsake us:

People are forsaken by their strength, "My heart throbs; my strength forsakes me [עֲזָב] (Psalm 38:10). They are forsaken by their emotions, "My flesh and my heart may fail (Psalm 73:26). They are forsaken by friends, "For it is not an enemy who taunts me.... But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend" (Ps 55:12-13).

The way Scripture deals with these instances of abandonment is with the counter-promise that God will never abandon or forsake us:

I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken (Ps 37:25); For the LORD will not forsake his people (Ps 94:14); Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.... (Isa 49:15).

As a pastor I am often brought close to people's sorrows. At times like these, I try to remind them of God's promises. Over the years I have found no promise more comforting than the words of Deuteronomy 31, "God will never leave you or forsake you" (Deut 31:6; Heb 13:5). When all else is falling away, if a person knows God is with them, has not abandoned them, they have a peace beyond understanding.

But some of you can relate to Psalm 22. There are times when you experience the unthinkable—you feel abandoned, *even by God*. And like David, this is not because you've turned from him. It is in the midst seeking him:

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 (Ps 22:1-2).

Christians believe that the presence of God makes suffering bearable. Christians also know that the absence of God creates more than an emotional problem; it creates a theological one. How can God forsake his people?

This Good Friday, I want to remind us that the experience of Godforsakenness is not ignored by Jesus. In some of his last words from the Cross, Jesus cries the words of Psalm 22, as the darkness descends:

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. 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?" (Matt 27:45).

Psalm 22 is a prophecy of Jesus' crucifixion. It is also a way to grasp something of our Lord's experience that day. One commentator writes,

More than any other passage of Scripture, Psalm 22 penetrates into the actual suffering of our crucified Lord: the pierced hands and feet, the body itself agonizingly pulled apart, the racking thirst, the mocking on lookers.... We are face-to-face with the sheer reality of divine inspiration, for, 1000 years before the event, David not only foresaw suffering, but the suffering of the Crucified. We marvel as we tremble.¹

As we considered Jesus' experience of forsakenness in light of Psalm 22, here is the question I want to take up. *How does our Lord's experience of Godforsakenness transform ours?* We will make the case that Jesus' experience of forsakenness is on our behalf, and that it transforms our dusk, into dawn. How is this so? Because on the Cross Christ's bears all the things that would finally separate us from God—he bears forsakenness, so we don't have to.

To see this, we'll simply follow the U-shaped flow of the Psalm, which goes way down, then suddenly up again. We'll break it into these movements: **(1) Dusk**, **(2) Night**, and **(3) Dawn**. As we close, we'll be asking just how it is that Jesus' forsakenness becomes the end of ours.

¹ Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, 61.

I. Dusk

When the Psalm opens much darkness has set in—we are well into dusk. The darkness spreads as the Psalmist's enumerates his sorrow, which takes many forms: physical, social, psychological.

An array of animals describes the terror of **physical** threat: "Strong bulls of Bashan surround me" (v.12); "they open their mouths like a ravening and roaring lion" (v.12); "dogs encompass me" (v.16); "save me from the mouth of the lion.... "from the horns of the wild ox" (21, 22).

We are not certain what experience this recalls of David. But there is a no doubt what it foretold about Christ: Can you see him, surrounded first by the Jewish Sanhedrin, questioned, mocked, slapped? Then, inside the governor's headquarters, a "whole battalion gathered," Jesus is striped, crowned him with thorns, mocked and spit on (see Matt 26:57-68; 27:27-31). And then from the cross, "those who passed by derided him" (22:6; Matt 27:40).

And here is where the physical turns to **social** and **psychological** pain. The sufferer describes his humiliation:

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!" (Ps 22:6-8).

Do you know what it is like to be surrounded by a crowd that hates you—a mob that jeers and insults you? Or have you ever felt like the Psalmist, "I am a worm, not a man" (22:6).

Some of you know what it is like to feel humiliation. To be made to feel small before your peers, your friends, the world. You can still feel being in school, sitting alone in the cafeteria, laughed at by others. You lost your job and feel you wear the shame like a sign when you walk into any room. You feel small—a worm, not a man.

So, David prophesies that Christ—the Son of God—would know the darkness of physical, social and psychological torment.

But we still have deeper to go. The darkness gets worse. Dusk turns to night.

II. Night

The worst of it relates to the sufferer's **relationship with God**. God was supposed to be his unfailing ally but seems to have abandoned him. Do you hear the pain and confusion in his words, when, after crying that his prayers have gone unanswered (vv 1-2), he says,

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.... 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 (Ps 22:3-5, 9-10).

The psalmist is not a godless man. He is a true believer and has been since he was so young.

But the sufferer descends further and further down—down toward **death**:

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** (Ps 22:14-15).

The Psalm foretells Jesus' end. He breathes his last. The earth trembles. The Temple curtain is torn asunder. It seems to any onlooker that God has fully forsaken him.

What happens between God the Son and God the Father as Jesus breathes his last remains a mystery we cannot fathom.

After pondering it for many hours, the great **Martin Luther** could only declare, "God forsaking God! No man can understand that."² **Charles Spurgeon** said understanding it was akin to Moses approaching the burning bush—we are before something we cannot comprehend fully; on holy ground.³

What we do need to be clear about, however, is just what was so dark about Christ's experience of forsakenness. For other great men have been martyrs. Martyrdom is not what brought Christ into the blackest of night. His darkness came in the form of taking on the sin of the world and bearing the judgement of the Father.

Perfect Righteousness Desecrated by Sin

Consider what it was like for a perfectly Righteousness person to suddenly desecrated by the sin of the world? Paul tells us, For our sake he [The Father] made him [The Son] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21). In Christ's heart must have been this twisted torment of suffering as a truly innocent man, and yet, at the same time, feeling the poison of our sins flowing into him.

² Cited in Charles Spurgeon, "The Saddest Cry from the Cross."

³ Charles Spurgeon, "The Saddest Cry from the Cross."

Perfect Union Torn Asunder

Second, Christ is experiencing a loss of closeness unlike any we have known. Jesus is the eternal Son of God, who has always known perfect fellowship with his father. And now, not only is he losing this, but in a way that feels like betrayal. What else could the word “forsaken” mean? God the son, feeling betrayed by God the Father. Here is the experience of a shattering of a relationship that our worst losses merely echo.

This is a descent into forsakenness unlike any we have ever known.

But now notice, there is a sudden and unexpected turn in the Psalm—a turn that speaks resurrection!

III. Dawn

In verse 21, we come through the bottom of the “U” and start our ascent, and quite suddenly: “Save me from the mouth of the Lion!” becomes “You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!” (22:21)

The Psalmist then paints a picture of praising God amidst the people of God: “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation, I will praise you” (22:22; cited in Hebrews 2:12 of Jesus).

Of the God who seemed to forsake him, he now says, “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... ²⁶ The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD! May your hearts live forever! (22:24, 26).⁴

Psalm 22 is not only a window onto the sufferings of Christ. It is a Psalm of hope—a psalm where darkness turns into light; dusk become dawn.

Even as Christians, we still experience times when it feels like God has abandoned us—our prayers go unanswered, sickness overtakes us, we don’t feel God’s closeness like we once did.

I want us to see, however, how considering Psalm 22 in the light of the Cross of Christ, we see a new light shining in our darkness, reminding us that in Christ, it is never dusk, but always dawn: the day of our salvation is rising. We see this in three ways:

⁴ He concludes the Psalm with a note of trust and praise: it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; ³¹ they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it (22:30-31).

(1) The Big Picture

First, because Christ's experience of forsakenness was worse than ours, and still turned out to be temporary, it calls us to see our own experiences in light of this bigger picture. We need this Christ-perspective.

David is completing this Psalm with that larger perspective in mind. He has passed down and then up the "U shape." And notice the inscription that is placed atop the Psalm. It reads: "To the choirmaster: according to The Doe of the **Dawn**. A Psalm of David" (Psa. 22:0)

We cannot be exactly sure what "Doe of the Dawn" means. However, it certainly suggests to me a far more peaceful setting than do the following lines of dereliction. We picture a lone doe at early dawn, just as the sun's first rays are coming over the horizon. Our mind wants to wander over to the next Psalm, Psalm 23, where David tells us God is our shepherd. It is the presence of God, not absence, David recalls: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps 23:4).

Friends, we can never fully know the meaning or purpose of experiences in our lives in the moment. Often it will not be until years later that we see what God was doing, or we come to see just how it is that he was with us, guiding us. Other times, it will not be until our own resurrection, when we stand with eternity before us, that we will understand. But this much is true: in light of the Cross of Christ, we know our darkness is not the big picture.

(2) The Extent of God's Love for You

Jesus, after his resurrection, says to his disciples, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). This promise is grounded on the fact that Jesus has destroyed all things that could separate God and God's people—all things that could lead to final forsakenness for a Christian: things like the penalty for sin, the power of the devil, the finality of death. In the light of the work of Christ, it is as Paul says

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38-39).

(3) The Presence of the Forsaken Savior

Finally, Christianity is utterly unique in presenting us with a God who has felt our pain. Jesus knows what it feels like to be betrayed by friends, his own people; and Jesus knows what it is like to feel like God himself has abandoned you. So, when you are feeling this way, there is someone down there, way down there, who knows exactly what it is like—the Man of Sorrows, the Man of Psalm 22. He is the forsaken one, who will never forsake you.

Jesus' goes so low in forsakenness, that he stands under ours ensuring that we cannot fall any further. In fact, he finds us in our forsakenness, like a lifeguard, grabs ahold of us and begins to swim us to safety.

At the very end of the Bible, we are given a glimpse of the great city and renewed world God has planned for the people he will never forsake. And it reads, "The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its **lamp** is the Lamb" (Rev 21:23). If the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world lives in you, if He has come into your life, you never have to fear the darkness: He is light. He is Life. It is never dusk but always dawn.