

Melancholia

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 | Psalm 22:1-11 | Hebrews 10:16-5 | John 18:1 – 19:42

PSALM 22:1-11

¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? ²O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. ³Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. ⁴In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. ⁵To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame. ⁶But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. ⁷All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; ⁸‘Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—let him rescue the one in whom he delights!’ ⁹Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. ¹⁰On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. ¹¹Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

INTRODUCTION

In his 1917 essay, *Trauer und Melancholie (On Mourning and Melancholia)*, Sigmund Freud suggested that there is an inextricable connection between mourning and melancholy in how they are exhibited. But there is also one significant difference.

Melancholia is mentally characterized by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of self, expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults, intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment. We have a better understanding of this when we bear in mind that mourning displays the same traits, apart from one: the disorder of self-esteem is absent. In all other respects, however, it is the same.¹

In a sense, Freud is saying that in mourning, the loss is understood and dealt with consciously. The world of the mourning person may seem bleak and heart-breaking, but the loss is understood, and so can be addressed in a healthy way and eventually accepted. In melancholy, however, the loss is *not* fully comprehended. It is so unbearable that it cannot be processed by the conscious mind, but overwhelms the unconscious—with the pain eventually becoming directed at the self.

In our Psalm this evening, Psalm 22, I think we find a poet who is on the precipice of melancholy, confronting two truths that he cannot reconcile in his own mind: God’s forsaking him, and yet God’s faithfulness to him. Here is what I think he finds in trying to make sense of these two incompatible truths, and what we should find when we consider it: *Even when we do not understand our distance from God, we can be confident in his loving deliverance.* Let’s take a look.

1. FORSAKEN BY GOD

The first of the two truths that the Psalmist is attempting to reconcile is his feeling utterly alone, abandoned by God. The language here, in the first verse, is unambiguous. He does not complain

¹ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia* (Trans S. Whiteside; Penguin Modern Classics; London: Penguin, 2005), 204.

of feeling alone. He states it as fact. *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?”*² The Psalmist is aware that he is out of God’s favour in that moment. Throughout the first 21 verses of the Psalm, in fact, he alternates stanzas between these two irreconcilable truths. In just the 11 verses we have here, we see two stanzas indicating that he understands himself to be out of God’s concern, under God’s judgment.³

It becomes clearest in verses 6-8, where the Psalmist references being scorned and mocked, despised by his enemies. So severe is his isolation from any kind of acceptance or affection from others, and from God, that he feels like less than person. *“But I am a worm, and not human.”*⁴ Later in the Psalm, he speaks of having his bones out of joint and being laid in the dust of the earth.⁵ He is at an extraordinary low, a recognition that he is somehow outside the presence of the omnipresent God. Why? Why is he in this state?

Friends, there is just one thing that creates this kind of distance between man and God: sin. I believe this poet, in describing himself as a worm, is acknowledging that he is at fault. He is aware that this has come upon him at his own hand. But even beyond this passage, this notion that sin is what puts distance between God and man is a simple theological truth, attested to throughout the Scriptures: from the Garden of Eden and Adam’s first sin, resulting in their banishment from the Garden; to the exile in Babylon, decades of separation from God because of the people’s wickedness; to the simple truth captured in Isaiah 59: *“...but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.”*⁶ The simple fact is, our sin, our wickedness, our evil thoughts and words and deeds, rightly bring about God removing his righteous and holy presence from us. He ought to abandon us, to, in the words of the Psalmist, forsake us.

2. FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

And yet, there is an inherent tension in this forsaking, a reason this abandonment is so painful. It is at odds with another truth, an irreconcilable truth. It also is embedded in that first verse. *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*⁷ The Psalmist, in the midst of his cries of shame for having been rightly abandoned by God, yet still refers to him as *my God. My God.* There is still the foundation of an intimate relationship there.

In the alternating stanzas, the Psalmist recalls that God has always been there for his people. It has not always been like this. *“In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.”*⁸ Even his exclamation of feeling subhuman is contrasted with the following stanza: *“Yet it was you who took me from the womb... and since my mother bore me you have been my God.”*⁹ The bitterness of feeling like a worm in the present comes from having been known from his birth by God.

² Ps 22:1.

³ Ps 22:1-2, 6-8.

⁴ Ps 22:6.

⁵ See especially Ps 22:14-15.

⁶ Isa 59:2 (ESV).

⁷ Ps 22:1.

⁸ Ps 22:4.

⁹ Ps 22:9-10.

This is the irreconcilability of the Psalm. He feels certain of his relationship with God, confident in God's faithfulness and sovereignty.¹⁰ And yet, he recognises that he is helplessly apart from God in this moment, separated by his sin and under God's judgment. And so, he despairs. He tries desperately to make sense of it. He cries out in the form of a question: "*Eli, Eli, lamah azabtani? (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?)*"¹¹ He does not know how to reconcile these two truths, the character of God, which is to rescue his people, the people he loves and with whom he is in relationship, and yet his own, that is the poet's, profound, tragically necessary need to be rescued, and the rightness of God to righteously abandon him.

3. RECONCILING THE IRRECONCILABLE

So, how can the Psalmist reconcile these two truths? How can we? Because the truth is, we should all feel this way. The alternating stanzas of despair and confidence are, for most of us Christians, the experience of life every day. Back and forth, we bounce between shame and confidence. And we should all experience the melancholy, the internal conflict, the despair of losing God, of being distant from him, in our sin, and yet the irreconcilable truth that he is as merciful and faithful as he is just. Sometimes, we may experience it acutely. Sometimes, in considering my own sin, I experience it. It looks like depression. I feel like a worm, subhuman, utterly alone, abandoned, and grieving for my loss. This is especially true when my sin is directed at a loved one, at someone who I cannot bear in my own soul to hurt, and yet am horrified to have hurt in my own selfishness, my own sin.

What can be done in these moments? The Psalmist remembers, *we can be confident in God's loving deliverance*. In fact, I think this is why the stanzas alternate. Each time he is overwhelmed with his grief, he immediately turns back to the foundational truth of God's faithfulness. He grasps at hope. In fact, the last third of the Psalm, which we did not hear, is a meditation on this very idea. So, in verse 20, the Psalmist can plead with God: "*Deliver my soul...*"¹² And yet, by the end of the Psalm, he can confidently say: "*...future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.*"¹³ And why can we be so confident? How is it that we can join this poet in his certainty?

Friends, this is the very night in which we remember that act, that sacrifice which is won our deliverance. For on the cross, God did not abandon us, but rather, abandoned his Son, Jesus Christ. It was not we who exclaimed "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani,*" that night, but Jesus Christ who cried out: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"¹⁴ In loving us so much that he died for us, atoning for our sin in his death, he took the abandonment we deserve. This should give us hope. Just as the resurrection should give us hope—remember Psalm 51 from the Sunday before last—the cross should give us certainty that God's wrath has been taken from us and given to Christ Jesus. Even when we cannot understand our distance from God, we can be confident in his loving deliverance.

¹⁰ See Ps 22:28.

¹¹ See Ps 22:1 (אֵלֵי אֱלֹהִים לָמָּה עֲזַבְתָּנִי).

¹² Ps 22:20.

¹³ Ps 22:30-31.

¹⁴ Mark 15:34.

CONCLUSION

Friends, no matter how deep in melancholy we fall, we must remember, we cannot be abandoned or forsaken or separated from God. His love overcomes our sin. Indeed, Paul, in his letter to the Romans, in considering the result of the cross and resurrection, reminds us of this: *"...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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."*¹⁵ I don't know if Freud is right about the difference between mourning and melancholy, but I do know Paul is right about God's love for his people. So, even when you and I feel so distant from God, let us look to this cross and remember his faithfulness. His love and mercy are more than our sin. And they transcend our separation from God.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, thank you that in sending your Son to dies for us, you have made it possible for us to draw near to you, that you may draw near to us.*¹⁶ *In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹⁵ Rom 8:38-39.

¹⁶ Jas 4:8.