

It's a cry sobbed in the dark. It's a fist raised heavenward scream. It's a prayer exhaled at the oncologist appointment, at the food bank, at divorce court, in the unemployment line, at the cemetery. God, God, why did you dump me? Why did you leave me alone? There are no limits to its age, race, gender, creed. Even those who don't believe in God are looking for someone, anyone, even God, when they find themselves in the dark of life and all alone. This is the universal cry of despair for those who have come to the end of themselves. It is a psalm, a song that resonates deep within all who are familiar with suffering, even the suffering God Himself.

I love reading the psalms from Eugene Petersen's paraphrase, *The Message*, which we read from this morning. While not a true word for word translation of the Bible, Petersen has gone back to the original Hebrew and Greek, the languages in which the Bible was first written, and he has captured the sense of the verses, the character in which they were first written. There are many solid translations of the words of Scripture, technically correct, but very few of them are able to convey the emotion, the soul of the meaning. The psalms are oozing with emotion; they are full of soul. They are earthy and rough not smooth and certainly not polished and as much as I love the poetic strands of the King James, none of the psalms were ever meant to be spoken in the King's English. They were the songs and prayers of every day people. For those of us who are more familiar with the Bible, reading these verses from *The Message* can enable us to hear them in a fresh way, rather than simply glossing over verses we have heard so many times before that it is hard for us not to just tune them out. But a Psalm like Psalm 22 is not just a Psalm of Psummer. It is a song, a prayer for whenever we find ourselves in despair. I like what James Limburg, a retired professor of Old Testament at Luther Theological Seminary, has written: "Psalm 22 encourages us to take our questions, our complaints and our anger to God. This is all right for Christians to do, because this is what Jesus did when he prayed the psalm. Our prayers do not have to consist only of praise, because our lives do not consist only of happiness."¹ Because our lives do not consist only of happiness. I love that line. I love the honesty that Limburg invites here. Psalm 22 encourages us – Christians – to take our questions, our complaints, our anger to God. We don't have to pretend that our lives are lived from happiness to even greater happiness, painting on smiles. Rather, the truth is, the reality is, that even as Christians, even the beloved children of God know happiness and pain, joy and sorrow, we feel embraced and loved and we feel forgotten and abandoned. And so Psalm 22 is an honest expression of one who feels abandoned, forgotten, unheard. It was David who wrote Psalm 22. David, who as a young boy was anointed by God as the next King of Israel. David, who killed the giant Goliath with a stone and a slingshot. David who wrestled a sheep from the mouth of a lion and lived to tell. David, who was the King's personal therapist. David is now in distress and he is calling out "Where are you God?" He can recall all those stories of the ways that God helped, that God rescued others in their own times of desperation but where is God for him now? And he draws a pathetic portrait of himself, nothing but a lowly worm, one to be kicked around in the dirt, trampled by the herds that are coming for him, his body being torn apart and left for dead and even then, his enemies do not leave him alone. He is tormented and nearly dead, he cries out. Hurry God! David knew what it was like to find himself alone at the bottom of the pit of despair. He was despised and hunted. He was #1 on

King Saul's most wanted list and a prize for anyone who brought him in dead or alive. David knows despair. You can hear it in his voice. Its building. Despair is like a flood, a trickle at first and the water is rising but you are swimming, keeping up, and then a dam bursts and its all you can do to keep your head above water and wait for a rescuer. My God, my God, don't put off my rescue.

Stories of despair are all around us. Maybe you've read one in a text this week, reading deep loneliness between the lines, or been on the other end of the phone line this week, listening to a voice quivering. Maybe someone stopped you in the aisle at the grocery store or at the gas station pumps or stopped you in the hallway at work, or sat across from you and poured tears into their coffee cup. Our newspapers and tv screen are filled with the very worst of them. Of course, that's all in a race for viewer ratings – to find the most sensational of all the stories of despair out there. And let's just acknowledge that it's a sick race. But let's not be too harsh on the news media. They are, afterall, just trying to keep their jobs. When it comes to the sick game of despair one upmanship, we are all players. Someone tells you a story of how rough their week has been; you tell a story of how your week has been worse. You haven't slept in days. I haven't slept in weeks. You tell me you've been sick with a cold for a week, I've had it for a month. In other words, I'm sorry you think you have problems but they really don't compare to mine. Let me tell you about them. There's something about the pit of despair that we seem to relish in. Maybe it's that old adage that misery loves company. Or maybe it's not exactly that we love finding ourselves in the pit of despair itself, but we can live for the kind of sympathy and attention that comes with it. When it comes to despair, there are just some stories that seem almost beyond our comprehension. There are no shortage of stories of despair: animals tied in their yards, overcome by flood waters, wheelchair bound senior citizens sitting in water up to their arm pits, a police officer who drowned in his car on his way to help others. And these are just the stories coming out of Houston this week, never mind the thousands of unwritten stories from South Asia, from India and Nepal and Bangladesh where more than 1200 have perished and millions are homeless. But this week, there was one story among all the others that epitomized despair. The New York Times told it this way: "Shivering from hypothermia, [3 year old] little Jordyn Grace was clutching her mother's unresponsive body as the floodwaters rose around her. A rescue team in a Zodiac boat, on the lookout for those in distress, spotted the small pink backpack the girl was wearing and pulled her and her mother aboard. "Mama was saying her prayers," she said."ⁱⁱ

Our lives are a mix of faithlessness – a lack of faith and faith – trust. At times we feel both utterly hopeless and then we remember hope.ⁱⁱⁱ We remember God. That truth manifests itself in Psalm 22. David expresses deep despair. He is crying out to God, pleading for God to save him. And then, in the next breath, in verse 22, he can already envision what his response will be when rescue comes, what he I going to tell His friends about how God has come through. Here's what I'm going to tell everyone. My speech will be punctuated not with swear words to which we have become so accustomed in our time but with with Hallelujahs as I tell my story of the God who never lets you down, never looks the other way. He has never wandered off to do his own thing. He has been right there listening.

“From the first day of my detainment, said Pastor Hyeon Lim, “until the day I was released, I ate 2,757 meals in isolation.” {He was alone in a very real way.} “During his two years and seven months in custody, winters were spent digging holes that measured one metre wide and one metre deep. “The ground was frozen. The mud was so hard that it took two days to dig one hole,” he said. “My upper body was sweating; my fingers and toes were frostbitten.” Other times he was put to work breaking apart frozen coal at a storage facility. Spring and summer were spent outside, toiling eight hours a day in the scorching sun. But a mix of faith and propaganda had helped him through the ordeal. During his first year in captivity, he read more than 100 books and watched some 300 films on North Korea. “I also read the Bible in both English and Korean five times and memorized over 700 Bible verses,” he said. “There were moments of discouragement, resentment and grumbling that soon changed in courage, joy and thanksgiving.”^{iv} Sounds like Psalm 22 was among the verses he memorized. From faithlessness to faith. From despair to hope. Alone in a prison cell in North Korea, Pastor Lim knew God was still with him.

It’s not immediately obvious when we read Psalm 22 from The Message. But if you are familiar with the story of Jesus, in particular, the story of his suffering and death, you will recognize these words. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These are the words of Jesus from the cross, the loneliest words ever spoken, and they are the opening words of Psalm 22, the cry of despair of the God who not only suffers with us but suffers for us. Jesus knows our despair. Ann Voskamp reminds us that The wounded God doesn’t say, “Do not fear. I will give you all the answers.” He doesn’t say, “Do not fear, I will take away all our pain.” But the wounded God says it like an embrace: “Do not fear, for I am {with you}.”^v Jesus is with us/ The God who knows first hand what it is like to suffer, to look death in the face, to be imprisoned in the pit of despair, to go through Hell literally. He is with us. He brings light to our dark places. He conquers death. He gives hope to the hopeless and he promises the he will never leave us or forsake us or abandon us. He is with us. Here at the table. Out there in a world full of pain and suffering. We are not alone. Hallelujah. Come to the table all those who are hungry for hope. He is here.

ⁱ James Limburg, Psalms for Sojourners

ⁱⁱ The New York Times, www.nytimes.com, August 30, 2017

ⁱⁱⁱ A restatement from Sam Van Eman, from Ann Voskamp's Blog post, August 22, 2017

^{iv} the guardian.com August 14, 2017

^v Ann Voskamp, Instagram, September 1, 2017