

MARK: THE PROPHETIC HOPE IN SUFFERING

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I. OPENING: COMMON SUFFERING

How many of us have suffered through something in the past?

How many of us are suffering through something in the present?

How many of us will suffering through something in the future?

Suffering isn't a super fun subject. It's not something we normally think of as a good conversation starter. "Hey, how's your suffering going today?" Yet, it inevitably shows up in our relationships, our activities, our finances, and our calendars. In fact, it's not too difficult for suffering to dictate the course of our life. The emotional fallout, the back brace, the pill regime, the financial encumbrances.

The question, then, is not *if* we're going to suffer, or even *when* we're going to suffer, but what do we do *in the midst of* our suffering?

In our concluding message on the Gospel of Mark, I want to examine one of the most interesting aspects of the crucifixion of Christ, and connect it with how we view whatever season of suffering we find ourselves in.

II. DARK WORDS

I'd like to begin with a quote from the late theologian Karl Barth, who, to my knowledge, is the only theologian to have ever been featured on the cover of Time magazine: [*1 Karl Barth.jpg*]

*"At the very point where we refuse and fail, offending and provoking God, making ourselves impossible before Him and in that way missing our destiny, treading under foot our dignity, forfeiting our right, losing our salvation and hopelessly compromising our creaturely being—at that point God Himself intervenes as man. Because He is God He is able not only to be God but also to be this man."*¹

—Karl Barth

Whether your caused your suffering, someone else caused it, or it is simply a natural part of being a created being in a fallen landscape, have you ever muttered something to yourself or to someone else that's dark?

"This is never going to change."

"I'm never going to get better."

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, A Selection*, selc. by Helmut Gollweitzer, ed. and trans. by G.W. Bromiley (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 112.

“I seriously can’t take this any more.”
“There’s simply no other way forward.”

Jesus makes a similar statement in one of the New Testament’s most provocative moments, shared in all four Gospel accounts, when he is on the verge of death as seen in Mark 15:33-34:

Mark 15:33-34 (NRSV)

The Death of Jesus

33 When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land[h] until three in the afternoon.
34 At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann brings added depth to the gravity of this situation: [2 Jürgen Moltmann.jpg]

“The Son suffers dying; the Father suffers the death of the Son. The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son. The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father, and if God has constituted himself as the Father of Jesus Christ, then he also suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son.”²

—Jürgen Moltmann

At what place in life do you have to be in to say to God, “Why have you abandoned me?” Or corporately, “Why have you abandoned us?” How bad does it have to be?

At what place in life does God-eternal, the Word made flesh who lives among us, say to his divine Father, “Why have you left me?” That’s a dark place.

- Suffering has certainly dictated his present course of life.
- Perspective is distorted.
- Relationship is questioned.
- Physical pain is mind-numbing.
- Emotional strain has overloaded everything.

III. THERE’S ALWAYS MORE TO THE STORY

Even when we say dark things, we’ll often follow it up with, “But I don’t really mean it.” There’s something inside of us as people, and most certainly as Christians, that tends to refuse the plight that at first appears to be inevitable. But we can’t discover that until we tend to dig a little deeper, to express what we’re really going through and then give God a place to speak to us.

There may be some of you who recognize that what Jesus said in Mark 15:34 was actually said well before him in the book of Psalms. And I’d like to turn there and read from Psalm 22.

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 243.

Please note that no Israelite ever read the Psalms as poetry; that would've been a completely foreign inference for them. The Psalms were always and forever meant to be song lyrics.

If I say, "Don't worry, be happy," it sounds almost belittling. But if we sing it, it takes on a completely different emotional value.

Psalm 22 (NRSV)

Plea for Deliverance from Suffering and Hostility

(Address to God; Complaint)

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

(Confession of Trust)

- 3 *Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.*
- 4 *In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.*
- 5 *To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.*

(Complaint)

- 6 *But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.*
- 7 *All 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!"*

(Confession of Trust)

- 9 *Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.*
- 10 *On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.*

(Petition)

- 11 *Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.*

(Complaint)

- 12 *Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;*
- 13 *they open wide their mouths at me,*

like a ravening and roaring lion.
14 *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 mouth is dried up like a potsherd,*
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
16 *For dogs are all around me;*
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;
17 *I can count all my bones.*
They stare and gloat over me;
18 *they divide my clothes among themselves,*
and for my clothing they cast lots.

(Petition)

19 *But you, O Lord, do not be far away!*
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
20 *Deliver my soul from the sword,*
my life from the power of the dog!
21 *Save me from the mouth of the lion!*

(Statement of Assurance)

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

- Do you see the psalmist wrestling back and forth throughout the text? God does not always expect passive poetry from us!

- But in the end, what wins is the confession of trust.

(Vow of Praise) - transition

22 *I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;*
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

- Moves from personal lament to a corporate call to worship.

(Vow of Praise; Confession of Trust)

23 *You who fear the Lord, praise him!*
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
24 *For he did not despise or abhor*
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.
25 *From you comes my praise in the great congregation;*
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

26 *The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live forever!*

27 *All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.*

28 *For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.*

29 *To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.*

30 *Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,*

31 *and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.*

Look at verse 24:

24 *For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.*

The Psalmist ends up confessing that God never truly hid his face, that there was never actually cause for alarm.

In the fourth century, Gregory of Nazianzus wrote: [[3 Gregory of Nazianzus.jpg](#)]

“It was not He who was forsaken either by the Father, or by His own Godhead, as some have thought... But as I said, He was in His own Person representing us. For we were the forsaken and despised before, but now by the sufferings of Him who could not suffer, we were taken up and saved.”³

—Gregory of Nazianzus

IV. SUFFERING NEVER HAS THE LAST WORD

Mark has done something incredibly dramatic here, something that would have astounded his 1st century audience as much as it would’ve those who heard Jesus utter this famous words.

³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Fourth Theological Oration*, ch. 5, The Master Christian Library (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998).

Due to Mark's style of writing throughout his Gospel account, as well as the Hebraic understanding of the power of allusion, Mark and Jesus have essentially dropped a *prophetic hope bomb* in the middle of the battle.

- If I say, "Every little thing," you'd say, "is gonna be all right."
Where does your mind go? Jamaica, reggae, and hippy lettuce.
- If I say, "It was the best of times," you'd say, "it was the worst of times."
And where does your mind go? Paris, the French revolution.
- If I say, "Four score and seven years ago," where does your mind go?
Lincoln's Gettysburg address and the battle to end slavery.
- If I say, "I have a dream," where does your mind go?
Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights revolution.

The power of Mark's inclusion of "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" reveals the very reason Jesus said it:

Jesus knew that every Jew that heard him say it would reply, "Hey, I know that song! And I know how it ends!"

We see this because in the following verse (35) (1) Mark never specifies the religious community ("his disciples," "the Pharisees," etc.), as is his custom in the rest of his Gospel, but instead "some of the bystanders" (NRSV) who "misunderstood" (NLT) and (2) as such, it would only be the unreligious community who would ever misappropriate "*my God*" for the prophet "*Eli*" since they were unfamiliar with Torah and the Psalter. A Jew would never miss either connection to the sacred texts. See Worth's citations of Brown on 'Ēlî (Hebrew (MT)), 'Ēlāhî (Aramaic), Elōi (Mark), Ēli (Matthew).⁴

When Jesus quotes the opening line of a song, he wants to you finish it!

Let hope rise!

Look at verses 27 and 28:

*27 All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;*

*and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.*

*28 For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.*

Let hope rise!

⁴ Thomas Worth, *The Central Word from The Cross: A study of Matthew's account of what Jesus said when He died* (term paper, BIB 640NE, Northeastern Seminary, May 13, 2003).

Then 30 and 31:

*30 Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.*

Jesus is saying that while it feels like God has abandoned us in the present, the future has a different ending!

In the midst of your pain, God wants you to remember that he has a good end in mind!

When God looks at your suffering, he says that there is something at work that is bigger than suffering; there's something that's going to effect future generations and extend out to the nations of the earth!

V. OUR RESPONSE / CLOSING CALL TO WORSHIP

What is our posture in the midst of suffering? The Psalmist writes it and Jesus directs us to it:

*22 I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
23 You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!*

Praise him not just when it's easy but *especially* when it's hard!

Testify about him not just when you're strong but *especially* when you're weak!

Christians don't roll over and die, they knell down and praise!

If there's something you're suffering through then its worthy of praising through! This is your opportunity to praise through your suffering in the midst of the congregation beside your brothers and sisters! Take advantage of such a privilege.

ADDITIONAL WORKS:

Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996).

Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014).

Traci Birge, “Psalms of Disorientation” (lecture, BIB512NE, Class 3 A5, Northeastern Seminary, February 25, 2017).