

Psalms: The Language of Prayer Part Two
Speaker: Tim Mackie

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons, where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

All right, well, this is episode two of a four-part series we're doing on the podcast. These were teachings that I did a number of years ago, exploring the book of Psalms, and particularly learning how to adopt the ancient poems and prayers in the book of Psalms as, like, a "grammar book," teaching me the language of prayer and biblical faith.

The book of Psalms contains a *wide* diversity of people and their different emotional journeys and experiences as they go through life. And they teach us what it means to talk to God, not just when things are good, but in the whole variety—from good to horrible—seasons and experiences that we have in life.

This teaching is based on Psalm 22, and we're reflecting on the poet's experience of extreme suffering and pain, and what it means to hold on to the conviction that God is good and has redemptive purposes for the whole world—including me. And what it means to believe *that* when life is absolutely horrible—especially when the sin and moral compromise of other people overflows into my life and brings hardship into my story—and how do you talk to God in the midst of that?

Psalm 22 gives a remarkable expression of both—eventually trust, but not at first—what this poem does is teach us the language of lament and protest. Biblical poets were not content to just say, like, "Well, you know, God's good and, sure, things are bad, but I'm sure it'll all work out."

No, the Psalms teach us that *protesting* to God about the horrors that take place in our world is a crucially important habit that we need to adopt. It's a habit that Jesus adopted—he prayed the words of this poem when he was dying on the cross. That should tell us something of the importance of these lament poems for Jesus, and for me too, if I'm going to be one of his followers.

So there you go. We're going to explore Psalm 22. It's very powerful, so much going on here. Let's dive in.

[Musical Break (03:11—3:17)]

These prayers give "pride of place" to our emotions in our prayer life. And that—some of

us are, like, [Tim laughs] going to run through the door because of that, because of, whatever, your family of origin, or you're about as emotional as a *rock*. That's just how you are. And others of you are really excited about that, but you know that you're kind of prone to being way over-emotional.

And so remember—I won't go into detail—but last week, we kind of set the playing field that the Psalms: they don't stuff or deny our emotions in our journey of following Christ. But at the same time, they don't show us prayers that are simply "overtaken," or driven, by emotion. They take this middle way that is the way most of us did not grow up with, which is praying *through* our emotions. It's about an intentional, thoughtful, reflective—discovering the sources of what we're feeling—and reminding ourselves of God's character and who we are, and just pouring out the whole mess in God's presence. And so tonight we're exploring Psalm 22, and we're exploring what it means to pray through our pain and our grief and our suffering. If you have been a Christian for very long, you almost certainly have had to face the contradiction—what I call "the great contradiction"—what I think is one of the most, kind of, formidable challenges to belief in God and belief in Jesus. And it's both a theology issue—but it's also a very personal issue.

And that contradiction is this—and we're going to explore how David prays through it tonight, through Psalm 22. The contradiction is: that we say we believe—and we gather weekly, and we gather in homes and one-on-one—in terms of our own beliefs and convictions, if you're a Christian, we believe that God is good, that he's real, and that he's present, and that his will and purposes for our world are to heal and to save, and that he loves the world and everyone in it. We hold that belief. And we hold it, not just because we think it's a "nice thing to believe." We hold it because we can point to examples of God's actions in history, where he demonstrated his goodness and his care.

And so as we're going to see in the Psalm here, for the Israelites and in the Old Testament, the main action of God's care and goodness was the Exodus—redeeming the slaves, the Israelite slaves, out of Egypt. He showed his mercy, he answered their prayers, and so on.

And if I'm a Christian, *foremost*, I can point to Jesus: God's action in entering human history, in living and dying, and being raised for us. Right? That's why I believe any of this in the first place: it's because there's a whole bunch of eyewitness testimony that this man lived and died, and said and did these things. And so I hold that really firmly, right here, and I can point to Jesus, and I can say, here's how I know that God is involved and that he acted—to say it.

So I have that in one hand, but in the other hand, you read the newspaper or whatever—actually nobody reads the newspaper anymore—you read MSNBC, or whatever, *New York Times*, whatever, on your phone or something, and you just look at the tragedy and the horror of human history, and of the chaos of the majority of humanity's just daily life, and the pain.

And if you haven't been there yet, you will come there—you reflect on your own experiences of pain and suffering. And how do the two of those go together? It's what I call "the great contradiction." And for many people, when hardship and tragedy strike their lives, they either don't know how to hold on to this belief in God's goodness—or

they begin to question it, and they let it go altogether. Or they alter their view of God, and because he's—God, some “absentee, distant landlord,” or whatever. Because where was God in my pain and in my suffering?

And if you haven't felt this contradiction yet in your own journey of being Christian, just give it some time. [Tim laughs] Give it some time. You'll eventually be there. Because this isn't just a theology problem. This is part of the human experience, in living in a broken world.

And so the good news is that the book of Psalms doesn't try and solve this intellectually for us. In fact, the Bible, for the most part, doesn't actually tell us about *why* or *how* evil entered into the world. What the Bible is trying to tell us is what God is *doing* about the problem of evil and suffering in human history.

And the Psalms are not trying to give us a theology answer. What the Psalms are giving us is language for how do you pray through that contradiction—how do you pray *through* it? And the way you do it is: about one-third—almost fifty of the prayers in the 150 prayers in the book of Psalms—almost fifty of them are prayers that are generated *out* of the pain and anguish of this contradiction.

And the way that these prayers, these biblical prayers, move through it is through lament and protest . . . through lament and protest. You don't deny that you feel this way—that you feel abandoned by God. But at the same time, you don't just “sell the farm” and ditch the whole thing. You *pray through it*. What does that look like—what does it mean to *lament* and to *protest*? And that's what Psalm 22 is all about.

Psalm 22 is kind of long, but we're going to move right through it, and you already have it open, most of you. I want to make, just, first, a big-picture, kind of, observation about Psalm 22 that I think is very powerful, about: what does it mean to *lament* and *protest* as a way of praying through our tragedies and our pain and our grief? What's that even mean in the first place? And then we're going to move through.

When most of us—I think our default mode of prayer, when there's a crisis—there's something super difficult, hardship enters our life—I think the prayer, kind of, “mode” that most of us get into—at least myself, and I've asked others—is kind of this, it's—I could just call it “request mode,” right? Which is the—Anne Lamott, she says she prays three kinds of—you guys know Anne Lamott? She's a great essay, nonfiction writer—and she says she has three prayers, basically, which is: “thank you, thank you, thank you,” “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” or “help me, help me, help me.” [Tim laughs]

And so essentially, I think the mode that most of us get into when hardship hits is: *help me, help me, help me*—right? Which is just, “God, would you provide a solution, give relief, send this resource that I need, answer this prayer.” We get into “request mode.”

And here's what's *super interesting* about all of the prayers of lament in the book of Psalms, is that—they do request. They *do* request. There are requests here in Psalm 22—but it is a *really* small portion of the prayer.

Look at Psalm 22 with me. Just look at the first line: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Is that a request? It's a question, isn't it? But it's not a request. It's not a request. Verse 2: “My God, I cry out by day, but you're not answering.” That's not a request—it's a statement, isn't it?

Verse 3: “You are enthroned as the Holy One. You are the one Israel praises, and ancestors put their trust in you.” So we're still not requesting yet [Tim laughs]. Verse 6, “I

am a worm and not a man”—that’s a sad self-description, but that’s still not a request, is it? Verse 9, “you brought me out of the womb,” verse 12, “many strong bulls surround me, strong bulls of Bashan”—still not requesting.

Verse 14, “I’m poured out like water,” verse 16, “dogs are surrounding me.” Verse 18, “They’re dividing my clothes”—like *what*? Do you see this? This huge majority of this prayer, and there’s no request. It’s an anguished, detailed description of what’s happening to me and how I feel about it.

Then, verse 19, “But you, Lord”—here come the requests, and they’re quite short, and it’s just a small part of the prayer—“don’t be far from me, you’re my strength, come quickly.” Verse 20, “Deliver me.” Verse 21, “Rescue me, save me.”

Now this stuff, right there, okay. This kind of—I’d never, really, even thought about this until it was pointed out to me. I think the assumption that we have, when hardship comes, is: “God already knows what’s happening. He *already* knows how I feel. What I *need* to do is tell him exactly what he’s supposed to do about it.” [Tim laughs] Right? That’s the assumption that we are—and you see, this psalm has precisely the *opposite* assumption.

The assumption in this prayer is: God knows exactly what to do—deliver me, save me, rescue me, help me. Right? So God doesn’t need help knowing what he needs to do. The majority of this prayer is taken up with describing what’s happening to me, and how I feel about it—do you see that here? This is the total opposite of the mode that most of us get into. And this is the nature of biblical lament and protest.

[Sound of a loud motorcycle passing by] That was awesome—and it might have been Josh White. [Tim laughs] So he turned forty yesterday. Josh White turned forty yesterday. It’s his birthday weekend, so that’s why he’s not here. And he also got his new, refurbished motorcycle—it might have been him. I don’t know, sorry. Anyhow. So in other words, we get into “request mode.” We think God needs help knowing what to do. He already knows. He already knows what’s happening, and he already knows how I feel about it. But the psalm—the biblical prayers—do just the opposite. They assume what, actually, God is most interested in hearing is *me* describing how I’m processing all of what’s happening to me, and how it’s making me feel—do you see it? I mean, you can just see it now, in the prayer—*eighteen* verses of detailed descriptions of what’s happening, and how I feel about it, three *short* verses of requests, requests. And so I just want to camp out here for a few more moments, because I think this gives us an insight: that we don’t actually know how to lament very well. We don’t know how to pray very well, in times of suffering and of hardship. These psalms are here to teach us how to do that. And they do it, primarily, through *lament* and *protest*.

Now, when I say the word “protest,” a whole bunch of, kind of, ideas come into our heads that I don’t think are helpful for us. We think of protests, and we think of: there’s one every weekend [Tim laughs] somewhere in downtown Portland for different causes, or whatever. We think, maybe, of “anger,” or whatever. And that’s—anger may or may not play a part in it—but “protest” is a different category here, in these prayers, in the book of Psalms.

And the best thing I can do is really just show you a kind of contemporary example of it that’s both—I’m using it because it’s a *really* good example of lament and protest. Two, it’s funny, which is important because this is a really heavy topic, and the rest of the

message is—I don't really have very many jokes [Tim laughs]—because it's about suffering and anguish.

How many of you have heard of the letter to Continental Airlines, from the passenger in seat 29E? Anybody? The “letter from seat 29E”? I'm really curious—oh, awesome. [Tim laughs] All right, good. So it was viral on the interweb, but you know, this was—it was about five or six years ago, or whatever. The “letter from seat 29E.” This is an actual passenger complaint sent in from—it was a flight from Sweden to Houston International—from the person in seat 29E.

[With laughter in voice throughout] “Dear Continental Airlines”—this is amazing—“I'm disgusted as I write this note to you about the miserable experience I'm having sitting in seat 29E on one of your aircrafts. As you may know, this seat is situated directly across from the lavatory, so close that I can reach out my left arm and touch the door. [Tim laughs] All my senses are being tortured simultaneously. It's difficult to say what the worst part of sitting in 29E really is?”—question mark [Tim laughs]—his spelling's not great, by the way.

“Is it the stench of the sanitation fluid that is blown all over my body every sixty seconds when the door opens? Is it the whoosh of the constant flushing? Or is it the passengers”—and note my edit here—“*bottoms, bottoms*”—you can guess what he put in there—“the passengers' *bottoms* that seem to fit into my personal space like a pornographic jigsaw puzzle?”

This gets better—it's brilliant. “I constructed a stink-shield by shoving one end of a blanket into the overhead compartment—while effective in blocking at least some of the smell, and offering a bit of privacy, the *bottom-on-my-body* factor has increased, as without my evil glare, passengers feel free to lean up against [Tim laughs] what they think must be some kind of blanketed wall. [Tim laughs] The next *bottom* that touches my shoulder will be the last!”

[Tim laughs] It gets better—it gets better, “I'm picturing a boardroom, full of executives giving props to the young, promising engineer that figured out how to squeeze an additional row of seats onto this plane by putting them next to the lavatory, as illustrated here. I would like to flush his head in the toilet that I am close enough to touch and taste [Tim laughs] from my seat.”

[Tim laughs] It gets better. “Putting a seat here was a very bad idea. I just heard a man groan in there”—and then I had to delete, entirely, what follows next. *Depiction of a man's bottom in my face*. “Worse yet, I've paid over 400 dollars for the honor of sitting in this seat.”

Okay, now he brings it home—brings it home here: “Does your company give refunds? I would like to go back where I came from and start over. [Tim laughs] Seat 29E could only be worse if it was located inside the bathroom. I wonder if my clothing will retain the sanitizing odor—what about my hair? I feel like I'm bathing in a toilet bowl of blue liquid, and there is no man in a little boat to save me. [Tim laughs] I am filled with a deep hatred for your plane designer, and a general disease that may last for hours.

“We are finally descending. Soon I will be able to tear down the stink shields, but the scars will remain. [Tim laughs] I suggest you initiate immediate removal of this seat from all of your crafts. Just remove it—and leave the smoldering brown hole empty, a good place for sturdy, non-absorbing luggage maybe, but not for human cargo.”

[Tim laughs] You know what I mean? You haven't lived until you've read "the letter from seat 29E," right? [Tim laughs] Now, this is brilliant in so many ways. And you might—what on earth does this have to do with Psalm 22? It actually is remarkably similar to Psalm 22, in the structure—did you see it right there? Every line of that was aimed at making a request—right?—the whole thing. What's the request? He actually only said it in one line at the end: *Just remove it*. [Tim laughs] Right? *Just remove the seat*. But the *entire* letter is aimed at getting a response—do you see this here?

In other words, he could have just said, "Request: remove it, remove it, remove it." That wouldn't be nearly as effective—or funny—[Tim laughs] right? But once you see he feels like he's "drowning in the toilet," and there's no "little lifeboat" to save him, or something—this is really quite a vivid metaphor [Tim laughs], right? So—it's almost poetic.

And so it's remarkably like Psalm 22. The majority of it is an exploration of "what is happening," in anguished detail [Tim laughs]—what's happening, and how he feels about it. And so obviously, this is full of irony and sarcasm—and that's why we're all laughing, but it's such a good example. We don't know how to do this very well, right? And so in this case, he turns to humor to know how to do it. But seriously, we don't know how to pray through our grief. We assume God doesn't—all I can think is that I assume God doesn't want to hear it, that he doesn't care. And so I'm just going to tell him what I think he should *do*, when apparently what he's really interested in is hearing what I'm feeling and what I'm processing.

This is precisely what's happening in Psalm 22. There you go—I know I made your sides hurt—[Tim laughs] and now we're not going to laugh anymore, because this is really intense. But just ask yourself—I mean, I would even encourage you: just get yourself into a mindset of a time where you had to face "the contradiction." And ask yourself how you could have prayed. Some of you are, right now in your life, in the middle of that contradiction. What would it look like to pray a prayer like that—hopefully with not as much dry sarcasm, but at least with honesty and with heart?

Let's dive in. We're going to work through David's prayer, here, and see how he prays through his grief. A little note here, at the beginning here—that's part of this prayer: "For the director of music, to the tune of 'The Doe of the Dawn' or 'The Doe of the Morning,' a psalm of David." And most of us, we kind of read right over these. Sometimes you get really important information—like last week, we heard about when David prayed Psalm 3 "while he was fleeing from his son, Absalom."

This is important for some other reasons. First of all, do you guys know the tune, "The Doe of the Morning"? Yeah, neither do I—[Tim laughs] right? And neither does anybody, right? But this is talking about the melody to which this prayer was played in Israel's worship in the temple. And it was for a director of music to know, like, "Hey, do this melody when you do this song."

Now that just tells us something really important, right there. In other words, this originally was a psalm of David, generated out of—as we're going to see—a very anguished, difficult life experience. We don't know what that experience was. And so David's description of how he feels and what's happening to him is actually very open-ended. It's nowhere [near] as specific as "the letter from seat 29E."

And so all of a sudden, David's prayer passed into the prayer-life of his people. And there's 1,000 years separating David praying this prayer and Jesus taking it on his lips,

hanging on the cross. And during that 1,000 years, who knows how many countless thousands of Israelites prayed this prayer, in their time of anguish and need? And so what, essentially, this little note does is it opens up David's prayer—it's not just about him, and it's not just about Jesus—this prayer is for anybody who has ever felt abandoned by God.

He begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the cries of my anguish? My God, I'm crying out by day, you don't answer. I'm crying out by night, I don't find any rest." There's no description of the circumstances—and so all of a sudden, anybody who's ever felt that confusing sense of "absence of God" in your life, this becomes your prayer immediately. This is how he begins: with how he *feels*.

But also, a form of protest—it's clearly, "If God were listening, he would realize I've been crying out day and night—so this is not okay. If God were really aware that I've been crying out day and night, he would answer immediately, because God wouldn't tolerate that kind of thing in his world." So you can see there's emotional energy here—"Why aren't you paying attention to me?"

It's not *angry* protest, because who's he praying to—what's the very first words? This is very important. Biblical lament and protest are based on relationship. He's talking to "my God." He assumes that he's *his God* and that *he cares*, and that makes the "sense of absence" all the more painful. He cries out, "My God"—he begins with this appeal. Look at the next part of the prayer—this is instructive. We're going to move through it, showing us what it looks like to *lament* and to *protest*. Verse 3, he says, "You're enthroned as the Holy One. You're the one Israel praises. I mean, in you, our ancestors put their trust. They trusted, and you delivered them. They cried out to you, they were saved. They trusted in you, and were not put to shame."

What's he doing right here? Just stop and think about this: what mode of prayer is he in? He's not describing *how* he feels anymore—what's he doing? He's referring to how God has proven his faithfulness in the past—"there have been times in the past where people cried out to you, and you totally responded." And just think, for David, when he talks about "our ancestors cried out to you and you saved them," what story is supposed to be coming into your head? It's like the main "foundation story" of the Old Testament—of Israel's salvation.

It's the story of the Exodus. They were in slavery, oppressed. They cried out to Yahweh. He sent them a deliverer—saved them out of Egypt. In the midst of his—it's like these contradictions, these feelings—he's saying, "I don't *feel* like you're present. I don't see you anywhere to be found, but I *know* that you have responded in the past."

And so this is a way of—he's not doing "self-talk" here. He's reminding God—that God has been faithful in the past: "Why aren't you doing that same kind of thing right now?" That's a legitimate question. It is—you're not alone in asking that question. And apparently God invites us to remind him of his past salvation when we feel the lack of that presence and salvation in our own lives.

Let's keep going. He says, "But I'm a worm, I'm not a man." He feels "less than human," isolated. He says, "I'm scorned by everyone, despised by people. All who see me mock me. They hurl insults, shaking their heads. They say, 'He trusts in the Lord, let the Lord rescue him, let the Lord deliver him, since he delights in him.'" He takes a deep dive,

down here, into his isolation—I mean, really, quite a deep dive.

We get into the thing, like, “Of course God already knows I feel like this.” No, dude—like, verbalize it. Articulate it. He’s feeling *deeply* isolated. Those of you who have been in periods—this often happens in situations of sickness or in death. You lose a loved one, and even your best friends have a difficult time knowing how to talk to you. Do you guys know this experience, or have had this, right?

And if you’re in the presence of someone who’s experienced grief and tragedy—even if you want to talk with them, you don’t know how. Tragedy is a very isolating experience, even for people that care about you, much less people, in this case, that are persecuting him, and so on. And so he just prays right through it. He just pours it all out before God. He doesn’t stuff it. He doesn’t let him take it over—let it take over him. He just, he prays right through it.

And then he instantly moves even deeper—verse 9, he says, “You’re the one who brought me out of the womb. You made me trust in you, even at my mother’s breast. From birth I was cast on you, from my mother’s womb you have been my God. Don’t be far from me. Trouble is near. There’s no one here to help me.”

These are some of the most unique descriptions of God, actually, in the whole Bible. God is depicted as a midwife right here—do you see that? You “brought me out of the womb, laid me at my mother’s breast.” It’s a very—he knows that God’s the author of his life. He knows that God’s responsible for existence. He knows that God is so close to him, and has been since his first breath.

And he depicts God as this “midwife”—this strong, maternal presence that’s always been with him: *I know you care about me. Where are you? Where are you?* That’s as gut-wrenching as “the letter from seat 29E” is funny, isn’t it? This is deeply personal.

And again, I’m commenting along the way, but I think—some of us—this is uncomfortable for us. We’re like, “I don’t want to talk to God like this,” but there you go. Apparently it could be one of the most healthy things for your relationship with your creator—is to just *really* articulate your grief, and your emotions, and your feelings.

Let’s keep going. “Many bulls surround me. Strong bulls of Bashan encircle me, roaring lions that tear against their prey open their mouths wide against me.” He didn’t just go on a jungle safari—okay?—that’s not what just happened. So this is a very common metaphor, in the Psalms in particular, and in other biblical poetry: to describe either circumstances that are very hostile or dangerous for you, or people who are your opponents or enemies, or whatever—to describe them in terms of vicious animals. So it seems kind of strange to us, but this is super-common in their culture and time. So these bulls and lions—these are the most uncontrollable creatures that humans can think of. The circumstances seem completely “out of control”—which is what he goes on to say, verse 14, through these metaphors. He says, “It’s like I’m poured out like water. All my bones are out of joint.” *It’s like I’m falling apart—no coherence and cohesion in my mind or heart.*

“My heart’s turned to wax, it’s melted within me”—an image of fear. “My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. You lay me in the dust of death.” It’s like this image of him actually being forced down into the dirt—he has no vitality, no vigor. He’s laying in the dirt, no energy. He’s dry—no vigor, no vitality.

“Dogs surround me”—dogs are scavengers, in their culture and time. Not too many

people had pet dogs back then. They're wild packs that scavenge. And so here is this dead man lying in the desert: "Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me. They pierce my hands and my feet"—or some of your translations have "they hack off" or "they chop at my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones. People stare and gloat at me. They divide my clothes among them. They cast lots for my garment."

So he's in this place of isolation and pain and grief. He feels like he's dying. He can't hold it together. And what do people around him do? They close in to take advantage of him. They're gambling for his possessions and so on. He feels completely isolated and alone. That is so intense, that's so intense.

It's only now that he moves into request-mode—and quite briefly. He just says, "You, Lord, don't be far. You are my strength. Come quickly to help me. Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs. Rescue me from the mouth of the lions. Save me from the horns of the wild oxen." And that's it. That's his request.

He assumes that it's much more important to God, and to himself, that he *really* articulate what's happening to him in his grief and his pain. This is so instructive for us. I don't know how to do this very well, and I'm a child of our culture—just like all of you are. I'm guessing most of you don't know how to do this very well—in fact, we might even be, kind of, "scandalized"—the raw boldness of talking to God in this way.

One of the—I think—kind of the more brilliant commentators I came across, in talking about lament—this lament-kind of prayer—is a scholar. Her name's Kathleen O'Connor. I'm just going to read you her words, because they're so powerful. She says, "Prayers of lament name what is wrong—what is out of order in God's world—and what keeps human beings from thriving in all their creative potential."

You can just see that—he's protesting that this is happening to him, and that this is happening in God's world. "Simple acts of lament expose these conditions. It names them. It opens them up to grief and anger, and makes them visible for remedy. And in its complaints and anger and grief, lamentation protests conditions that prevent human thriving—and this resistance may finally prepare the way for divine healing."

In other words—and I'm not a psychologist, by any means, but—times of hardship and grief—this isn't just, like, about "therapy," or something. This is about being human—whole human beings. God's salvation heals the whole of us. When we go through times of stress and tragedy and hardship and loss, stuff happens inside of us that we don't get. Right? Things get "misaligned" and "distorted" within us that we don't even know how to name.

And it seems to me that the biblical culture of "prayer and lament"—this is God's way of inviting us to process. This isn't "therapy"—this is just biblical, [Tim laughs] right? That we're whole human beings. This is what's so brilliant—this is in the Bible, you guys. [Tim laughs] You know what I'm saying?

So all of a sudden, these human words to God become, through the Scriptures, God's words to *us*, about how to speak to God about our suffering. He's *inviting* us to do this—and to *name* what's wrong, to draw attention to it, and to hold that contradiction together, in faith, and to say, "I don't know how, in this instance, God's goodness and care connect with the suffering and tragedy, but it's really messing me up inside, and I've got to talk about it. I've got to name it."

This is biblical *lament* and biblical *protest*—not angry, "wallowing" prayer. It's being

honest and pouring our hearts out before God. This is very powerful. And what this would look like for you to do, I don't know—right?—because I don't know your story. But this is what Psalm 22—and the fifty other prayers that are like it, in the book of Psalms—they invite us to do.

Now, something really important happens here. Right after verse 21, there's a whole "shift" in the prayer. And maybe you noticed it when we read through it. It turns—from this lament and request and protest—it turns from that, all of a sudden, to praise. Look at verse 22. He says—all of a sudden, "I will declare your name to my people in the assembly, I will praise you." And we're like, "Whoa, what—what just happened? So I thought he was in horrible circumstances here"? This is very common in these prayers. And normally—most certainly what happened is—you know, we can only speculate. David composed parts of this prayer. These are words that he said to God in his time of grief and anger and confusion, and so on—and pain. But at some point, he experienced deliverance. He experienced resolution to this. And so, at least here, essentially, we're going to see the scene of what he did was: he did what you're supposed to do when your prayers are answered. You go to the assembly at the temple, and you share the story with other people.

So he says—he goes to the temple, to the assembly—and "I'm going to declare your name, and praise God." And here's what he's going to say. Imagine David standing in the temple, after this whole time has passed, and he says, "All you who fear the Lord, praise him. All you descendants of Jacob, honor him, revere him, you descendants of Israel, for he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one. He hasn't hidden his face from him. He's listened to his cry for help."

And so he again addresses God then, in the temple. He says, "From you, God, from you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly. Before those who fear you, I will fulfill my vows"—which usually involved offering an animal of sacrifice to thank God for delivering you. And so he—and normally for those kinds of sacrifices, you throw a big party. What an awesome culture. When your prayers are answered, you slaughter, like, a goat and you have a huge party—[Tim laughs] right?—and you invite all your friends, and you tell the story of God's faithfulness to you.

This is a part of lament and prayer, in these prayers, is: when you find an answer—when there is resolution, when you do discover God's grace and mercy, or there's healing, or whatever it is—you don't just internalize that. You throw a party. You turn to God's people, and you have a party.

And so he says, "The poor will eat and be satisfied. Those who seek the Lord will praise him. And may your hearts live forever." I think this is actually, like, "Cheers," you know? This is: they're actually at the feast, and he's praising and thanking God—you know, "bottoms up," kind of thing with—celebrate, to celebrate what God has done in his story. So again, this is—we don't do this very well. And I don't think we even have a category for this. How many of us have a practice, in our prayer life, of moments where we invite other people in our lives to celebrate moments of deliverance and answered prayer, in coming through that "dark night of the soul"? Because actually what that assumes is: that you've actually invited other people into your struggle, and into your journey of pain and grief, and so on.

The fact that David—this is very, obviously, a very personal prayer—but at some point,

he's invited other people, "the assembly," into his story, so that they can share in his grief, and also share in his joy as well. This is another part of lament, as a community of Jesus's followers. It makes me think back a few months ago—Josh Garrels, one of our elders, he spoke on "community"—on our "second pillar" here.

And it was quite profound, what he shared. Namely, when we do this "Discover Door of Hope" thing on the first Sunday of every month—and it's a lot of newer people. People who haven't been around very long—and there's one thing that always comes up: "I am trying to find community—it's hard. I'm trying to meet people, I'm trying to connect, and it's difficult."

And especially for Westerners—the way we live and structure our lives, like—we're the most isolated individuals on the planet—right?—through how we work. But we don't know how to do this very well. And one of the ways—this is what Josh shared—is to just initiate relationships and invite people into your story—especially into your struggles. This has a way of bringing the threads of our stories together, and all of a sudden you realize, "I'm not the only one asking this question. I'm not the only one praying a prayer like Psalm 22." There's lots of other people who are wondering where God is. It's about uniting in those prayers, together.

David ends the prayer, verse 27: "All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord. All the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the Lord. He rules over the nations. All the rich of the earth will feast and worship. All who go down to the dust will kneel before him, even those who can't keep themselves alive."

And this is the part of Psalm 22 where we're, like, "Okay, that's cool—what does that have to do with anything"—[Tim laughs] right?—"at this point in the prayer?" This is what I think was happening—this is really profound. It's as if David—he thinks of his own story—of this tragedy in his life, where he called out to God, and he had to lament and pray *through* those emotions and those feelings—and at some point, he met the answer to those prayers. And he invited other people in, and he shared in the celebration of God's mercy and grace that he experienced in his life.

And it's almost here—like, at the end of this prayer—he sees that story of what he went through as just a small, little example of the story God is weaving in the whole of his world, as he meets the evil and the suffering and the brokenness of our world with his mercy and salvation in people's lives. It's as if *his* story reminds him of the *big story*: that God is set on redeeming and rescuing this whole world.

And so he ends by saying, "This thing that I experienced—of being able to praise God on the other side of my suffering—" he sees that all creation is headed towards this praise on the other side of suffering. "And all nations will come and will worship, for he's the king. The rich of the earth—even those who are going to the dust." This is the image of death—remember earlier he said, "I'm in the dust of death?" He apparently has the idea that God's commitment and his mercy—his commitment to our world even reaches beyond the power of death. That even death can't thwart God's ultimate purposes to save and to heal his people.

And so he ends by saying, "Posterity will serve him. Future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness. They'll declare it to a people yet unborn because he has done it." He envisions, like, this unending gathering of all

generations, all bringing their stories of suffering and pain and how God met them and delivered them—just going on, on and on, *ad infinitum*. And there's Psalm 22.

Go back to the first line here. My guess is that the second-half of the poem didn't resonate as deeply as the first. And that might be for a number of reasons. Some of us might be sitting in the middle of that contradiction in our lives, and we have no idea how or when God is going to bring his deliverance, so that I could even invite friends over and have a party—you know? Some of you have people that you care about deeply, who are in the *midst* of this cry of anguish, and they don't see God's faithfulness at work in their story. They don't see their prayers answered.

And so what do you do? Right? What do you do if you head to your deathbed, never being able to make it to the second-half of the Psalm—what do you do? And this is where, I think, the importance of Jesus quoting this Psalm as he hangs on the cross—where it becomes so important to us.

So there's something very mysterious and crazy going on—when you read the stories of Jesus's crucifixion scene in particular. There are over *twenty* places where the Gospel authors—where the writers draw attention to, or use language, or draw connections between what's happening to Jesus on the cross, and little details in this prayer—about the “hacking out,” or the “piercing of hands and feet,” about the “gambling over the clothing,” about the “insults” that people yelled at Jesus, that were very similar to the language of Psalm 22, and so on—and the fact that Jesus took the words of this very Psalm on his lips. So what's happening, right there?

And some of us, we think, [with excitement] “Whoa, that's crazy—unity of Old and New Testaments, and predictive prophecy, and so on”—and yeah, that's totally cool, right? But Psalm 22 isn't actually predicting anything, is it? [With a grin] Right? You read Isaiah, and there's clearly, like: “a Messiah is going to come, a king, he's going to rescue the world,” and this kind of thing.

Psalm 22 isn't—it's a prayer of lament. It's a prayer of lament. And it's David's prayer—but it became the kind of prayer that was so powerful, because it so, just, *nailed* what's going on inside of us—it became the prayer of thousands of others—countless thousands of others after David—to pray through their times of suffering.

And so what Jesus is doing—this is so powerful—what Jesus is doing is: he is taking up the suffering, both of his great ancestor David, but of *all* the thousands that have prayed this prayer after David, but before him. It's as if he is self-identifying with the suffering of humanity. What the great paradox of Jesus saying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” is: that on the cross, *God* becomes *God-forsaken*. He doesn't just, like, *sympathize* with human suffering. He actually self-identifies with it by entering into it.

And so what this creates is a space for you and I, as Christians, to pray the first half of this prayer, because we may never see the deliverance that we pray for this side of Jesus's return, and the resurrection, and the new creation. We may never see the full answer to those prayers and—those anguished prayers that you might even pray more passionately now because of the first half of Psalm 22.

But Jesus, taking this prayer on his lips, all of a sudden, gives me an anchor to hold on to, because God did not despise or scorn the suffering of that afflicted one, did he? God did not “hide his face,” ultimately, from Jesus. Jesus is God entering into our suffering, our anguish, so that he can conquer and heal it by his love.

I may never experience the second part of Psalm 22—but Jesus did. And as I make my confession of faith as a follower of Jesus, I put my trust in him—I just hang onto him for dear life, so that what was true of him and his resurrection may become true of me one day. And I may experience that now, I may experience that later, I may experience that in the new creation—I have no idea.

But what's most important in this Psalm is: it's the journey. This is David's prayer, this was Jesus's prayer, and this is meant to be our prayer too, as we look in faith to the fulfillment of God's promises—and we can point to the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus as the one who ultimately was delivered out of the suffering and death that you and I are in the thick of.

And so, man, I—seriously, this is so heavy—[Tim laughs] and I'm glad we had a good laugh at the beginning. Just as we gather every Sunday, we have this time—just this block of time, you guys—for quietness, for prayer, for worship, a chance to—whether it's by yourself or with whoever you came with—to come to the table and take the bread and the cup. And in that moment, we're actually—we're connecting with Jesus, with these symbols that speak of the *moment* that he cried out this prayer, where he identified with me and entered into my suffering with me.

And so [for] some of you, it might be your own story where you're in the middle of that pain and grief and wrestling with that contradiction. You might have a loved one, or someone you care about who's right there. And so, man, just take advantage of this time. Sit with Psalm 22 in front of you, perhaps, and allow yourself to go there—you know? Allow yourself to pray in a way that you never have before—that might make you feel a bit uncomfortable, but that God's inviting you to, because he cares. He cares—and he doesn't just care. He has actually done something about it in Jesus—his life, his death, and resurrection.

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hope that was helpful and thought-provoking for you guys. And thank you for listening to “Exploring My Strange Bible” podcast. If this is helpful for you—this series or podcast as a whole—you can help spread the word by sharing it with friends, or going onto iTunes, you can leave a review there. And cheers—we'll keep exploring the Psalms as we go onward, so—see you next time.

[EMSB theme fades out]