

## *Asking God for Help*

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*Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church*

*Sunday, October 15, 2006; Bryn Mawr, PA*

Psalm 22:1-10

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

### *Movement 1 – The Audacity of the Question*

This psalm starts with a shocking question. Have you ever heard a question that shocked and embarrassed you? Maybe it was a question that came from a child, voiced with seemingly naiveté. Maybe it was a question that came from someone who was not accustomed to the culture, and crossed unspoken taboos without knowing. It is the statement from the child pointing out the attire of the emperor, the lack of clothes, saying what everyone was thinking but what no one had the courage to say. Everyone is embarrassed; everyone is shocked because the child asked the question that everyone else knew not to ask. Maybe you have said something or asked something and later you found yourself in an embarrassing situation because you asked something and you should have known better. Maybe you have had that moment when you achieved an amazing level of flexibility because you somehow managed to twist and bend and place your whole foot in your mouth. It is that moment when we ask the shocking, the inappropriate, and the unexpected. We should have known better. We should have a little more tact and couth, but we weren't thinking and asked the embarrassing question.

This psalm starts with a shocking question. “Where is God?” We are shocked by the question wondering where God is in the midst of distress. We are shocked because it is not a question that we should be asking of God. We are shocked because other psalms promise that God will be with us always. Psalm 121 says that the Lord never sleeps and never slumbers. Psalm 134 says that there is nowhere we can go where the Lord will not be present. If we were to quickly thumb through the psalms, and other parts of the Bible, it would seem that time after time we would find examples and reasons for thinking and believing that God is always present, always with us, and will never leave us alone. Just last week I preached about Job, and in the end of the sermon I suggested to you that God will never leave our side. It is a basic hope that we look to, it is a promise we rest upon and is a foundation of our faith. God is always with us, even in the darkest valley, even in the hardest time, God is always with us. Yet this psalm asks the question, “Where are you Lord?”

So we are shocked by the question. When the psalmist is crying out the despair and the anguish, he is crying out, that God feels distance, detached and far from his suffering. “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.” What a shocking question to ask of the Lord, the one who never sleeps and never slumbers. What a shocking question to declare and shout out for the whole community of faith to hear!

It is the question that would come from someone still immature, the question of a child who just might not know better. It is the kind of question that doesn't seem to have been thought out. If we think about what all of the pastors and the scholars and even I have been telling you about God, and we think about this question, it is shocking and unexpected.

## *Movement 2 – Our Trust (fear?) of God*

We are supposed to have faith that God will always be with us. We are supposed to walk right into that valley of darkness with our chest puffed out, ready for any evil, any temptation, and any trouble, because we are supposed to believe that God will be with us wherever we go. We are supposed to run into the mission field without any hesitation and without any concern for our safety because we are supposed to believe that God will be with us. If we find ourselves with an illness or with a tragedy in our lives, we shouldn't let it hold us back; we shouldn't leave any room for despair because we have the Lord on our side. We are supposed to have faith that God will always be with us.

I remember a joke that has gone around enough that you probably have heard it but is apropos. A man was stranded in the ocean, and struggling to survive. A rescue boat came by, and offered to pull him out of the water to save him. The man turned down the help saying, "the Lord will provide." A little bit later a helicopter flew overhead and dropped a ladder to pull him out of the waters. Again the man turned down the help saying, "the Lord will provide." Well, eventually the man drowned and went to heaven. When he was in heaven, he went to God and exclaimed, "What happened, God, I had faith in you and I still drowned!" God answered, "I sent you a boat and a helicopter, what more do you want?"

The man had an almost hyper faith in God's protection. It was a faith that looked to show off and brag to the extreme. Do you ever wonder if you also are to have that level of faith? Do you ever wonder if you are to have that level of commitment and that level of trust, because it feels like we are supposed to be at that extreme level? I have preached again and again that God will be with us no matter what. I have preached again and again that God is with this church and that there is nothing that we need fear. But can you live it? Can I live that kind of faith without any questions? It is easy to say, but can we show that kind of faith? I think of religious groups like the Jehovah Witness who won't have blood transfusions, or groups like the Christian Scientists who won't use any kind of medicine because they have that much faith in God. Or of the television healers who have cleansed so many with such a sense of surety that crutches, and glasses, and wheelchairs are thrown away, and I wonder if I am also to have that kind of faith.

The bar is set very high for all of us, and perhaps we all find it difficult to reach. Even the psalmist seems to waver between the experience of the despair and the faith which we are supposed to declare. The psalmist cries out that God feels distant, but then, in the next breath, declares that to God, "You are holy, enthroned on the praise of Israel." But maybe he finds the façade hard to hold up and maintain because then he names his experience as that of a worm, but then goes back to declaring that "God has kept him safe before." This back and forth between the experience of the psalmist and the faith which is assumed pulls at us as we consider our own spiritual response to hardships. When we think about the struggles of life, when we think about hardships before us, when we think about the troubles of the world, it is difficult to throw all of our faith, all of our hope, and all of our trust to the Lord. Augustine even said to "pray as though everything depended upon God. Work as though everything depended upon you." But haven't you wondered if you are truly showing your faith if you try to do all the work yourself? Theologians like Hartshorn and Whitehead and Cobb would criticize such a hyper faith, stating that we place too much on God and not take enough responsibility ourselves. Yet isn't that what

we are taught? We should not be crying out, “my God, my God why have you forsaken,” because such a question suggests that we no longer trust and have faith in God. We are supposed to be stronger. We are supposed to be surer and we are supposed to believe that God will always be with us.

*Movement 3 – Our Rugged Individualism of Fear (trust?)*

I wonder if this tension of our faith affects our lives and relationships with our friends, our family, and each other. I wonder if we keep our troubles to ourselves because of we believe that we are supposed to trust in the Lord, and to show a weakness to our community shows a weakness in our faith. I imagine that there are a number of us here who are struggling with something that we have not shared, something that we keep secret because we are scared about how others might react. I imagine that more than one person here is holding something in that is eating away at your strength and your life because you need to be strong; or at least we want people to think that we are strong. We don't want to share the stress and the anxiety in our life because it would show a weakness in our faith. All we are supposed to do is smile and say with a level of certainty that we know that God is with us and will take care of us. Bottle up the concerns and the tears because they are not the response of someone who joins in the praise of patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel reminding us of a God who has and is protecting and taking care of us. Maybe we are scared, maybe we have some doubts, but we want to hold them tight to our chest, because we are not supposed to be scared and we are not supposed to doubt. It is like we are following the instructional videos of the 1950s. The ones that were shown in school to teach us the proper way to exist in society, the ones that told us to keep our emotions to ourselves and not share our sorrows. In the movie *The Best Years of our Lives* one of the characters had nightmares about a mission he flew in a bomber. But he couldn't share his story with anyone; instead he just kept his pain to himself. We smile and we shout our praise, yet we are suffering in isolation, we are suffering alone and we are scared. We are not willing to share our suffering with the community because that would be the absurd and the action of someone with a weak-faith.

Or maybe we share our concerns, but move quickly to the happy ending. We share that we are struggling with our health, but quickly share that we know all will be well with our God. We share that our life is stressful, but quickly demand that all will be well with our God. We laugh at our tears, and we laugh at our hurt because that is the sign of strong faith. I have heard so many times individuals making nice of a loss. When someone dies, the response is more often than not, “he's in a better place.” And more often than not I notice the grieved smile and say thank you. But I know many of them are thinking, “This is the place where they belong; this is that better place and he is gone.” But we make the suffering nice and rest on faith to see the nice-nice through. We would rather read the parts of praise of God rather than the parts of despair. Yet the tears still fall, the heart still breaks and the pain is still real as we keep it to ourselves. It is a natural reaction to want a happy ending, it is one that we feel is demanded by our faith.

What happens is our community as a church rests on a hope that denies the reality. Our community rests on a hope that will not leave space for the cries and the laments of the real. We could become a community that only shares a pie in the sky optimism and never shares reality. It is hard to rest in our tears. It is hard to hold onto our anxiety and our fears. We want to stand in the wilderness by ourselves with our pain

shielded and hidden. We want to be the rugged individuals who can stay strong, resting on the certainty that we will make it on our own. It is as if we are embarrassed to share our hurts and our troubles. It is almost as if we are ashamed that we cannot always be strong. So often we find out too late that someone is suffering, that someone was crying alone, and that someone needed help, because we hesitate to share. We hold back from God, we hold back from each other, and we stand alone in our pain, not wanting to show a weakness in our faith to God, to others, and to ourselves.

*Movement 4 – The Power of the Narrative of the Psalm*

Yet this psalm calls us, challenges us and pushes us to an honest relationship with God. The psalmist knows about the hope that we find in God. He declares the good things that God has done in the past for Israel, and for him. He even ends with a cry to the hope that God will make things right and that God will make things good. But at the same time he is honest with his own experience. It is as if the child in the parade, the one who points out the lack of clothing on the emperor, is looking right at the psalmist and notices the same thing that he notices of the emperor – a lack of outer garments. The psalmist declares his faith and his hope in God, but if he presumes to rest completely on just his faith, then he is found to be naked before God because he is not being honest. But instead, he clothes himself with sackcloth and ashes, instead he clothes himself with despair and fear and goes before the God in whom he trusts and in whom he has hope with a full palette of emotions. The psalmist goes before God and says, life is difficult and it feels like you are nowhere to be found. The psalmist makes that bold and brave prayer to God's face in an honest and course fashion, and his relationship with God is made real.

We have heard this psalm, this cry elsewhere as well. On the cross of our salvation, on the cross of suffering and humiliation and grace, our very Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ hung and cried out this psalm. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The words hang in their audacity as Christ hangs on the cross. This is the beloved, the Son of God, Word made flesh. If anyone has a complete connection to God it is Christ. If anyone can be sure of God's presence and help and hope it is Christ. Yet the cry still comes from his lips. The lament and the question of hope are voiced by our Lord. Augustine writes that the flesh of Christ was speaking – the human aspect of our divine Lord was crying out the despair and isolation as he hung on the cross. In a moment, on the cross, Christ took a psalm with what may have seemed to be an absurd question and made it blessed and holy and appropriate. We need to be honest with God. We need to voice our feelings of despair and hopelessness to God, just as the psalmist and Christ voice the question.

It is like going to your in-law's home for dinner every week, and every week you are served brussel sprouts. You smile and eat the brussel sprouts even though they are your least favorite food, and you end up dreading the visit, you are tense while you are there, and you leave with a bad taste in your mouth. You are not honoring the relationship with your in-laws by staying polite and nice. Stand up and shout, "I hate brussel sprouts" and be honest with your in-laws and your relationship will grow. You cannot keep going to God in prayer with superficial joy and over zealous trust. If you are scared, if you doubt, or if you don't know what to do, share that to the Lord. Be honest in your relationship with the Lord.

### *Movement 5 – The Power of Asking God for Help*

An honest relationship with God is one where we are free to ask for help. It is a relationship where you can ask the audacious question even if you already know the answer. It is a relationship where you can say, “I know that you are with me, I know that you are holding me in your hand, but right now it doesn’t feel like you are near.” After all, when the world crowds around us, when life seems to be taking us down, do we not truly feel afraid? Do we not truly wonder if everything is going to be ok? This is a message that I need as well as you, for there are times when I wonder how much I can just blindly trust God. There are times when I wonder if I can truly have a full and complete faith in God. A few years ago one of my sisters was going through a very difficult time in her life. It was a kind of situation where she was involved in so much self-destructive behavior that we didn’t know if she would end up dead the next day. All of us in the family were praying for her, and trying to help her in any way possible, but in the end we had to trust God. Now I could have been strong in my faith, and say with some kind of assurance that all would be well – but how could I know for sure? How could I say with certainty that all would be well? There were moments when I thought that God was far from my sister and our family prayers. There were moments when I wondered if God was anywhere at all with our concerns and our cares. All I could do is stand next to the father of the demon-possessed boy in the scriptures and say to God, I believe, help my unbelief. I need your help, Lord. I need your presence and your comfort. My God, it feels like you have forsaken me, help my unbelief.

We have all been in that place of doubt, and this psalm is moving and pushing us to say that which is heavy on our hearts. Say what you are feeling. Share that you are scared. Share that you are alone. Share that you are hurting, and share that you are falling. Ask God for help, even if you don’t think you need to. Ask God for help, even if you are embarrassed because of your lack of faith. Ask God for help because life is hard, because life is difficult, and because your heart is hurting. When you are in the waiting room of the hospital, and your loved one is in duress, how can you honestly rest upon a hope with certainty? Ask God for strength, ask God for hope and ask God for help. It is a simple prayer and it is a profound prayer of honesty and relationship. We are not rocks of faith, but clay, soft and supple, molded by the pressures of the world. We need God to continue to mold and make us, and at times we need to ask God for the help. In asking we are naming our concern and our anxiety. In asking, we are being honest with God about our fears and our worries. In asking we are truly being open in our relationship with God. If Christ the son could pray it to God the father, then why not you and I as well? Ask God for help.

### *Movement 6 – The Relational Response of God*

Ask and it will be given to you. Ask for God’s help and you will receive it. Yet it may be in a way that you are not expecting. Maybe God will come down and fix things directly, but maybe God will move others to be with you. Yet still, ask and it will be given unto you. Remember the hope that the psalmist speaks of interspaced and ending the psalm. Remember the hope that we rest upon, even as we shout and declare our honest question. Ask for help and it will be given unto you.

Yet be open to God's movement. God might not change your situation. God might not give you the winning lottery ticket. God might not reveal a cure. God might not take Jesus off the cross, but God will not leave you. It may feel like the Lord is distant, it may feel like you are alone, but God is still with you. And God will help you. Maybe you will find a new inner strength to survive. Maybe you will find a new perspective and way of thinking. Maybe you will meet someone who can offer you help and support. Maybe you will find a community ready and willing to help you. Ask God for help and be ready to follow God's lead in receiving that help. God might lead you to share with others about your concerns and your fears. God might lead you to cry with others and to ask aloud if God is truly present. God might lead you to take a chance of vulnerability because when you share, and when you are open, then you can find a support in the community, in the church, and in the greater body of Christ. Just as the psalmist calls us to be honest with God, we are also called to be honest with each other. That means we share our struggles and our fears. That means that we share our doubts and our strength. That means we share all that we have and all that we are with each other. This is a risk and a challenge for all of us to embrace. In sharing, in making ourselves vulnerable to each other, God will work through us to change us, to help us, and to make us whole.

My brothers and sisters I stand before you to confess to you that there are times when I wonder. There are times when I doubt. There are times when I cry out, "my God, my God!" I look to you for those times of doubt for strength. Maybe some of you have had doubts as well, and we can lift each other up. Maybe some of you have had similar struggles and we can lift each other up. Maybe some of you have been through difficult time before and can offer a hand and a guide to lead us through the darkness and the valleys. I look to you for strength.

I look to the greater body of Christ, the communion of the saints for certainty and for hope, and I find a way to keep pressing on even with my doubts and my anxiety. I look to Martin Luther King Jr. who prayed at midnight for faith in his fear. I look to Dietrich Bonhoeffer who prayed to God for direction when he could not decide the best course of action in serving his people. I look to pastors who have served before me who have prayed late at night asking God for help. I look to the greater community of Christ for strength.

I look to Christ for strength. I look to the one who hung alone on the cross and find hope in my despair. I look to the one who endured the rejection of the world and find hope in my doubt. I look to the one who dared to love in such a radical way that the world could not accept it and find hope in my tears. I look to the one who beat death, who beat despair and who beat rejection and find joy. I look to Christ for strength.

There are times that I wonder if God is present. Yes, there are times that I wonder. Yet let me tell you, at the same time that I doubt, at the same time that I wonder and I question I still have a deep, deep faith and trust in God. I keep pressing on because my faith is deeper than my doubts. I keep pressing on because my hope is deeper than my despair. I keep pressing on because I speak with the psalmist and say that there will be a time when "the poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord... All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord;... and all will proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it."

With you, and with the body of Christ, and with Christ Jesus himself I continue to march on, saying, I believe, and asking the Lord to help my unbelief. Let us ask the Lord for help together.

AMEN