

Counselor's Toolbox

How to Talk with God: Four Days in Psalm 22



by EDWARD T. WELCH

This guide through Psalm 22 is one example of how to offer a psalm to those who live with intrusive wounds from their past. It attempts to be faithful to the meaning of the Psalm and be hospitable to the person. To enhance the practice of slowing down and engaging with Scripture, the Psalm is broken into four exercises. Though this is a lot to ask, it's so important for someone to speak with God when their world is scattered and chaotic.

The secret to the appeal of the Psalms is that they teach us how to talk with God. Sometimes they teach us how to talk *about* him as, together, we explore the endless wonders of our Lord. But the heart of the Psalms is to teach us how to talk *with* him. You talk *with* him first, then you have words to say *about* him to others.

The sheer number of Psalms—150 here, and a few others throughout Scripture—suggests that our words to him are very important. The number also suggests that learning how to have these conversations is

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a difficult skill. Even the men and women who seem to be the most advanced in prayer often confess how they barely have a knack for it. Apparently, to be a needy child before our Father takes time.

Your tutorial here is Psalm 22:1–22, and it is a gem. The entrance to the Psalm goes something like this: For all those who, when they needed God most, found him distant and silent. The wounds identified in this Psalm come at the hands of other people. The first verses are familiar, though a bit irreverent according to our standards. But this is how God teaches us to speak with him. Jesus himself spoke these words from the cross (Matt 27:46).

Your mission is to enter into the Psalm and take possession of it. Make it your psalm. Put it into your words, and then speak those words.

Day 1—Listen

Imagine that you hear the words of Psalm 22 from within God’s house. The Psalms bring you to the house of the King. They were sung at the daily worship in front of the Hebrew temple, where God heard, taught, and spoke with his people. Now Jesus Christ has opened the temple to you, and you hear these words as a family member. Today, just listen to these words.

The Psalm seems to begin with your *why* questions to the Lord, but that is not exactly the case. Every psalm comes as a response to the Lord’s initiative.

He makes the first move.

He speaks first.

He asks you to speak what is on your heart.

“Pour out your hearts before him,” says Psalm 62:8. He knows you by name, better than you know yourself, but he wants to hear your words—from you.

One of the critical missteps in Israel’s past is they did not cry to him from their hearts but rather wailed on their beds (Hos 7:14). You can certainly understand why someone would wail on their bed (as if to no one), because trauma and abuse leave you feeling so alone. But don’t duplicate their misstep. God is not as silent as you might think. Instead, we are the ones who tend not to speak.

He invites you. “Tell me: What is on your heart?”

Here are a few specifics to keep in mind.

- There is a tension that goes through these words: trust alternates with confusion, and confidence alternates with doubt and pain. Notice that though the question *why* is prominent, the Psalm begins, “*My God.*”
- *Groaning* is better understood as very loud crying. It is used in Scripture for the bellowing of lions.
- And *I have no rest* means that even at night, the psalmist does not rest from this groaning but keeps at it.

As you go through the Psalm, say aloud the first section to the Lord, which is identified below as *My question*. God knows you through and through, yet the Psalms reveal that he places a high value on *you* speaking these words about your struggles to *him*. He knows they can be hard to find on your own and even more difficult to say aloud, so he gives them to you.

Then notice the rhythm of the Psalm. Back and forth. You speak about yourself; you speak about him. Your question begins to form into a request. You speak about yourself again. Your request becomes fuller, you have more words for it. By the end of your psalm, it leads you from a personal question to a public event in which you talk about God in your community. You might not be able to proclaim anything to that community quite yet, but think of someone whom you can either talk with about the Psalm or ask to pray that it would be lively for you. Invite someone in, as you have been invited in.

Here is Psalm 22. I have broken it into sections to help you see the rhythm of it. Circle the verses you find especially important.¹

My question:

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

1. The Psalm is quoted from the Holman Christian Standard Bible. We have changed the pronouns for God to lowercase based on our publishing standards.

But you...

- 3 But you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
- 4 Our fathers trusted in you;
they trusted, and you rescued them.
- 5 They cried to you and were set free;
they trusted in you and were not disgraced.

But I...

- 6 But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by men and despised by people.
- 7 Everyone who sees me mocks me;
they sneer and shake their heads:
- 8 “He relies on the LORD;
let him rescue him;
let the LORD deliver him,
since he takes pleasure in him.”

But you...

- 9 You took me from the womb,
making me secure while at my mother’s breast.
- 10 I was given over to you at birth;
You have been my God from my mother’s womb.

My request:

- 11 Do not be far from me, because distress is near
and there is no one to help.

But I...

- 12 Many bulls surround me;
strong ones of Bashan encircle me.
- 13 They open their mouths against me—
lions, mauling and roaring.
- 14 I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are disjointed;
my heart is like wax,
melting within me.
- 15 My strength is dried up like baked clay;
my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.
You put me into the dust of death.

- 16 For dogs have surrounded me;
a gang of evildoers has closed in on me;
they pierced my hands and my feet.
- 17 I can count all my bones;
people look and stare at me.
- 18 They divided my garments among themselves,
and they cast lots for my clothing.

My request:

- 19 But you, LORD, don't be far away.
My strength, come quickly to help me.
- 20 Deliver my life from the sword,
my only life from the power of these dogs.
- 21 Save me from the mouth of the lion!
You have rescued me
from the horns of the wild oxen.

My response...

- 22 I will proclaim your name to my brothers;
I will praise you in the congregation.

What difference does it make to you that this is a psalm of Jesus? He spoke it before you, and he invites you to speak it with him. It turns out that you are part of *his* community.

Write down what was especially helpful for you.

Day 2—Talk about You

Your initial questions, spoken to the Lord, are critical. If you weren't able to speak the first words of the Psalm to him, try it again today. If you did speak these questions to him, you have done important and difficult spiritual work, but the work continues.

As you read the Psalm today, notice the two sections labeled *But I*. These words are not necessarily floodgates that have suddenly opened.

Instead, the words took time to form. Strong feelings and painful events are not easily translated into words. Sometimes, there are so many pictures in your head and feelings in your heart that you cannot capture anything. But in God's house, you speak with him. He will help you with your words. Ask him.

Read through the Psalm. Notice how many words the psalmist is able to speak. Underline those words that cause you to think yes, that's me.

Having read it, you are now invited by God to speak. He says, "Please, tell me more. Here are some words that might help you." When you read about the bulls and the dogs, the Lord invites you to speak of brutal and inhuman treatment.

Write what is on your heart. You could borrow some words from Psalm 22 or simply give voice to your own.

Now speak these words to the Lord.

Day 3—Talk about Jesus

Most of our prayers are short. The irony is this: we think that God is silent and distant while we are the ones who don't speak and are far away. This Psalm works hard to lead you into a longer conversation with God. You will discover that longer conversations get you to the resting places you hear about at the end of most psalms.

Today, you will read through the Psalm again and give special attention to who God is. I have labeled these sections with the words *But you...* The psalmist includes two stanzas that speak *to* God and *about* him. In the first section, the psalmist is confident that God is enthroned over all, and those who are in his courts surround him with their praises. They praise him, in part, because of his mighty rescue of his people from Egypt, which he did with massive signs and wonders.

But you...

- 3 But you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
- 4 Our fathers trusted in you;
they trusted, and you rescued them.
- 5 They cried to you and were set free;
they trusted in you and were not disgraced.

[The psalmist is thinking: “The Israelites trusted you and you rescued them...”]

But I...

- 6 But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by men and despised by people.
- 7 Everyone who sees me mocks me;
they sneer and shake their heads:
- 8 “He relies on the LORD;
let him rescue him;
let the LORD deliver him,
since he takes pleasure in him.”

“But I...I feel as though I am nothing and beyond rescue.” The psalmist feels like the unwanted exception. But don’t miss this. He emphasizes, “they trusted in you” (v.4). Those early men and women of faith were the psalmist’s psalmists. Their *why* questions were gradually overtaken by the evidence that God was with them. When the New Testament disciples followed Jesus and the evidence of his resurrection was still in the future, they simply knew that there was nowhere else to turn. Only Jesus has the words of life (John 6:68).

As a general rule, let your *why* questions take you back to the historical evidence that Jesus has come and is alive and reigning. This evidence is God’s most personal and powerful answer to your questions.

So you go back to the evidence. The Old Testament saints looked back on the evidence of the exodus from Egypt. The plagues. The Pass-over. The parting of the Red Sea, and the routing of the entire Egyptian army. Slaves delivered and suddenly feared by the nations as though they were a mighty army. These events were God’s assurance that he was, in fact, with them.

You, a New Testament saint, also return to the evidence of the greater deliverance that began in earnest when Jesus took on flesh and walked among us to be our final Passover Lamb. That is the evidence that God is, in fact, with you by his Spirit.

Before you read the Psalm again, think about how you might talk with the Lord about who he is and what he has done. What Scripture could you splice into this Psalm to help you? Perhaps you could start with a paraphrase from Romans, the centerpiece of the apostle Paul's letters.

I am no longer condemned because, through trusting in him, I am now in Christ. The Spirit of life has set me free from the domain of sin and death. What I could not do for myself, God did, by sending his Son (8:1–3).

What other Scriptures come to mind?

Then in verse nine, the psalmist talks about God in an even more personal way. God has known him from the foundation of the world and served as the midwife at his birth.

But you...

9 You took me from the womb,
making me secure while at my mother's breast.

10 I was given over to you at birth;
You have been my God from my mother's womb.

Even if you did not know God until much later, he knew you at birth, and he has never left.

Toward the end of this portion of the Psalm, notice how the psalmist uses a particular name for the Lord: "My Strength" (v.19). This is how God invites you to speak with him. In a similar way that you might have nicknames for a child, spouse, or friend, you are encouraged to borrow names of God from others or devise your own based on how he blesses you. He is God, Lord, Father, Son, and Jesus Christ. He is your Shield,

Defender, Lord of Armies, Rescuer, Holy One, King, Maker of heaven and earth, and—in this Psalm—Strength.

Now, read through the Psalm with more careful reflection on the portions marked *But you...* Write out some of your own words about God as you remember the greater rescue that Jesus Christ brought to those who trust in him. But remember that it is a rescue that takes place over time, a lot of time.

Past: Your rescue has already taken place. Your sins are forgiven and nothing can separate you from God.

Present: Your rescue is taking place now. Each day you learn more about what Jesus has done, and you ask for new mercies as you look to him for deliverance from oppression and daily forgiveness of sins.

Future: Your rescue will be complete, and everything will be made right when you see God face-to-face.

He has been faithful in the past, he is faithful in the present, and you can trust that he will be again in the future.

This day has centered on who God is. What are some other names for him that both reflect your trust in him and will help you to trust him even more?

Day 4—Finish the Conversation

The Psalms consistently teach us to end our conversations well. Begin with raw honesty. Speak about yourself. Speak about the Lord. End with good words. This is the pattern that has entered into the best of our hard conversations with other people, too. We raise difficult things rather than leave them unsaid, and we want to stick with the conversation until we are able to end it well.

The psalmist closes this conversation, at least for the moment, with a request, then an action step. The request has elements of both

desperation and confidence. That, of course, is a difficult balance, so your more personalized version of this Psalm might borrow more heavily from these words.

19 But you, LORD, don't be far away [and I know
you aren't].

My Strength, come quickly to help me [you are
and you will].

20 Deliver my life from the sword,
my only life from the power of these dogs.

21 Save me from the mouth of the lion!

You have rescued me
from the horns of the wild oxen.

That last sentence is an accurate translation: “You *have* rescued me.” The psalmist moves naturally from request to assurance. This is the peculiar life we live, between Jesus’ deliverance accomplished at the cross and its final act completed when he returns.

Desperation with trust.

Desperation with confident hope.

The psalmist can see the deliverance unfolding before his eyes, and he sees his complete rescue with eyesight aided by God’s promises. Like a savvy general who foresees the coming battle and knows how it will go, we know that there are hard days ahead, yet we already see the end. All the New Testament letters teach us how to live in this in-between place in history.

As you make these words your own, think about what God’s deliverance in Christ means. How would the apostle Paul describe it? Peter? James? The writer of Hebrews? They were not expecting enemies to be immediately struck down. They knew, however, that the enemy who rules all enemies—the devil himself—has lost his hold on us, and we belong to God alone. The Lord will never leave you; he has forgiven you fully, and he speaks words of blessing over you every day. Every promise is yes in Jesus (2 Cor 1:20).

If you have words to add to this request, speak them to the Lord. And then, write them out and speak them again. We are slow learners, and repetition is helpful.

Finally, the psalmist identifies an action step that is common throughout the Psalms.

22 I will proclaim your name to my brothers;
I will praise you in the congregation.

The psalmist has now joined the fathers and mothers of the faith, and he even invites your voice to be among those who surround the enthroned Jesus with their praise.

He goes on for another nine verses. Read through them as inspiration for you to write your own good ending and response. Circle the words that you find helpful.

- 23 You who fear Yahweh, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
All you descendants of Israel, revere him!
- 24 For he has not despised or detested
the torment of the afflicted.
He did not hide his face from him
but listened when he cried to him for help.
- 25 I will give praise in the great congregation
because of you;
I will fulfill my vows
before those who fear you.
- 26 The humble will eat and be satisfied;
those who seek the LORD will praise him.
May your hearts live forever!
- 27 All the ends of the earth will remember
and turn to the LORD.
All the families of the nations
will bow down before you,
- 28 for kingship belongs to the LORD;
He rules over the nations.

- 29 All who prosper on earth will eat and bow down;
all those who go down to the dust
will kneel before him—
even the one who cannot preserve his life.
- 30 Their descendants will serve him;
the next generation will be told about the Lord.
- 31 They will come and tell a people yet to be born
about his righteousness—
what he has done.

A more resounding translation of the final line is “He has done it!”²
Write out how you might end this conversation well.

The Days Ahead

Have you proclaimed God’s name to any brothers or sisters yet? This is an important part of life in God’s house. It will be good for your soul and theirs. Imagine some possibilities.

- Send your personalized version of Psalm 22 to a friend. That is not quite speaking it, but you are, at least, going public.
- Ask the person you sent it to if they have a favorite psalm.
- Ask a friend to pray for where you have not been able to follow the psalmist and need help.
- Ask a pastor to pray for you where you have been stuck, and ask for ideas on how to break through.
- Tell someone one thing that has helped you from the Psalm.

Your aim is to keep God’s words close and accessible. One way to do that is to rewrite and assemble the pieces you have already written. A next step could be to put your written psalm off to the side and speak to the Lord from your heart as you follow the pattern of Psalm 22.

2. This is the New International Version translation of Psalm 22:31.

You will return to the Psalm again. As you do, you will find yourself circling more words and seeing new depths in them. Perhaps psalms spoken aloud will become a tradition. But there are 150 of them, and you might want to follow the Hebrew tradition in which they were sung, in order, at the daily temple worship. Your next psalm is Psalm 23.

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