

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.

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