StudieS in Psalms: Songs of FaiTh

Lesson Two
Pleading for God’s Help

Focal Text
Psalms 3; 13; 22:1-5, 22-24

Background
Psalms 3; 6; 13; 22

Main Idea
Although God can seem distant and unresponsive to our pleas for help, we can trust God to care and to respond.

Question to Explore
Have you ever wondered in desperation, Why is God waiting so long to answer?

Quick Read
God invites our honest complaints and trust.

Commentary
The following report to a state industrial commission was filed by a worker injured in the act of repairing a chimney.

Respected Sir:

When I got to the building, I found that the hurricane had knocked some bricks off the top. So I rigged up a beam with a pulley at the top of the building and hoisted up a couple of barrels full of bricks. When I had fixed the building, there were a lot of bricks left over.

I hoisted the barrel back up again and secured the line at the bottom, and then went and filled the barrel with extra bricks. Then I went to the bottom and cast off the line.
Unfortunately, the barrel of bricks was heavier than I was, and before I knew what was happening, the barrel started down, jerking me off the ground. I decided to hang on, and halfway up, I met the barrel coming down and received a severe blow on the shoulder. I then continued to the top, banging my head against the beam and getting my finger jammed in the pulley. When the barrel hit the ground, it burst its bottom, allowing the bricks to spill out. I was heavier than the empty barrel, so I started down again at high speed. Halfway down, I met the barrel coming up, and received severe injuries to my shins. When I hit the ground, I landed on the bricks, getting several painful cuts from the sharp edges.

At this point I must have lost my presence of mind, because I let go of the line. The barrel then came down giving me another heavy blow on the head and putting me in the hospital.¹

Now don’t you feel better about your day?

We’ve all had times on the brick pile. There are days when nothing seems to go well. Your brother-in-law has been diagnosed with cancer, or your house deal fell through, or your job was downsized. You got up that morning with no idea what trauma a phone call would bring. You wondered where God was when it happened.

Many of us are conditioned not to admit our pain. “Never let ‘em see you sweat” was a line from a commercial a few years ago, but it’s a way of life for many today. We are not supposed to tell anyone about our problems, lest we admit weakness. But keeping a stiff upper lip is hard when we have a broken nose.

The psalms we’ll study today will give us permission to be honest with God. If David, the “man after [God’s] own heart” (Acts 13:22) could voice his complaint and pain to God, so can we. Too, if Jesus, the sinless Son of God, could quote the words of one of these psalms to his Father, we are invited to quote them as well.

What pain do you most want God to heal today? What worry or burden do you need God to take? Have that specific problem in mind, and use these psalms to give it to God. Then lead your class to do the same this week.

**Trust God when you’re surrounded by the enemy (Psalm 3)**

During World War II, a general and his troops were surrounded on all sides. He is said to have told his officers, “For the first time in the history of this campaign, we are now in a position to attack the enemy in any direction.”

David felt the same way. It was bad enough to be at war with the Philistines and to have to put down attacks by rival kings. But when his son Absalom seized the throne in rebellion against his father, this betrayal must have been shocking beyond words (see 2 Samuel 15—18 for the story).
The setting
Israel’s great poet eventually found expression for his pain. According to early tradition, Psalm 3 is the result. It is one of the many psalms that contain superscriptions describing its author and/or setting. (More than three-fourths of the psalms contain superscriptions.) While this notation is not part of the inspired original text, it was attached to the psalm early in its transmission history. Some scholars question the reliability of some or all of these superscriptions, but they seem to have been credible to those closer to the events they describe. So we will assume that Psalm 3 is in fact “a psalm of David” written “when he fled from his son Absalom,” as the superscription to Psalm 3 states.

Here we find the first psalm attributed to David (Psalms 1 and 2 have no superscription). It is interesting that the very first Davidic psalm would be one of lament, a category into which many of the psalms fit. In this lesson, we will study three psalms in this category. Like all laments, they express pain and frustration with God and/or life. They are often bitter and always honest.

So they answer the invitation of the Lord: “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18). The Hebrew is literally translated, Come let us argue it out. That’s what David does in Psalm 3

David’s cry
David’s song of lament follows a kind of antithetical parallelism. Remember from last week that the psalms do not rhyme in sound but rather in sense. Some are synonymous parallelism, with the second line restating the meaning of the first line (“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands”—Psalm 19:1). Some are synthetic, where the second line amplifies or comments on the first (“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want”—Ps. 23:1). But many contain lines or stanzas that stand in antithesis or opposition to each other. That’s what we find in Psalm 3.

Here David pits complaint against commitment. Complaint:

O Lord, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
Many are saying of me,
“God will not deliver him” (3:1-2).

His foes, presumably part of Absalom’s national uprising against the king, were numerous. They were certain that God would not deliver the king this time. Otherwise they would not be part of the rebellion against him. David begins his psalm with honest description of the crisis at hand.

Then David moves to commitment:

But you are a shield around me, O Lord;
you bestow glory on me and lift up my head.
To the Lord I cry aloud,
and he answers me from his holy hill (3:3-4).
God was often seen as the “shield” of his people:

- “For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless” (84:11).
- “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart” (91:4).
- “O house of Israel, trust in the Lord—he is their help and shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord—he is their help and shield. You who fear him, trust in the Lord—he is their help and shield” (115:9-11).
- “Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him” (Proverbs 30:5).

David claims such protection in the present tense: “you are a shield around me” (Ps. 3:3, italics added for emphasis). He also claims that God bestows glory on him, perhaps a reference to David’s continued rule as king. God lifts up David’s head from discouragement so that David will look down on his enemies.

David said that because he cried aloud to the Lord with honest faith, God “answers me from his holy hill” (3:4), a reference to the place of the Lord’s sanctuary. The temple did not yet exist, but David already had a sense of God’s presence on earth and the fact of God’s answer to his need. So David gave his crisis to his Lord, claiming the Lord’s help by faith.

The king then put his faith into action:

I lie down and sleep;
    I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.
I will not fear the tens of thousands
drawn up against me on every side (3:5-6).

Sleep was the most vulnerable time of attack (see David’s stealth against Saul, 1 Samuel 26:7-10). Even when David was asleep, he was safe in the sustenance of God. Although “tens of thousands” might surround him, he was not afraid. He had given his crisis to God and was trusting God for its outcome.

Now David’s prayer becomes more specific:

    Arise, O Lord!
    Deliver me, O my God!
    Strike all my enemies on the jaw;
    break the teeth of the wicked (Ps. 3:7)

David could not strike at those who had rebelled against him, and so he was giving his enemies to the Lord. While David did not want Absalom to be killed (2 Sam. 18:5), he
prayed that all who joined his rebellion would be punished for their crimes. While David was in exile from his city and country, he had to trust God for his deliverance.

David was sure that his Lord would answer his need:

From the Lord comes deliverance;  
May your blessing be on your people (Ps. 3:8).

David knew that God would provide for himself and for the nation, “your people.” And God did. The rebellion was crushed (although Absalom was killed), and the king continued to rule the people of God.

Who is your Absalom? Who has surrounded you with attacks, gossip, or hurt? A wise pastor once advised me to “tell God on them.” Pray Psalm 3, and trust that the God who heard David hears you.

**Trust God when God seems far from you (Psalm 13)**

Even though David’s throne was in jeopardy, he knew he could trust God for deliverance. But there was a time when David was not so sure of the Lord’s presence and protection. Psalm 13 describes the king’s honest cry to a God who seemed far removed from his life.

There is no ascription to help us locate this psalm in David’s life story. At some point he felt that God had forgotten him and hidden his face from his need (13:1), that his enemy was triumphing over him while he wrestled with thoughts and sorrow in his heart (13:2). If God did not intervene, his enemy would overcome and rejoice at his fall (13:4). The situation was so dire that he felt close to death (13:3).

This was not the first time David complained of God’s absence. Verse 1, “How long, O Lord?” echoes David’s cry in Psalm 6, “My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?” (6:3). But Psalm 13 is an even more painful and transparent reflection of a soul in misery.

These complaints seem to describe that time when David was in exile from Saul, fleeing for his life before the king’s murderous malice. Hiding in caves, banded with renegades, without home or hope, David could only turn to God. At this or some other time of crisis, David found that he could express his pain honestly and openly to the Lord. So can we.

The biblical story is filled with people who trusted God even when God seemed absent from their lives. Abraham waited fourteen years from Ishmael to Isaac (Genesis 16:16; 21:5). Joseph endured years of prison and persecution before his dreams were fulfilled. Moses spent forty years in the wilderness before being called to lead his people to freedom. Daniel had to endure a lion’s den to be faithful to God. Paul and Silas sang hymns at midnight in a Philippian jail (Acts 16:25). John worshiped God even in exile on Patmos before receiving the Book of Revelation (Rev. 1:9-11).
Your Father may seem far away, but he is not. In fact, God is thinking about you this present moment. In Psalm 139, David was moved to pray, “How precious concerning me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand” (139:17-18, NIV margin note). How many is that? Try to calculate how many grains of sand there are if you wish, but the number would be phenomenal, wouldn’t it? That’s how often God will think about you today.

So David could conclude our psalm:

But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
for he has been good to me (13:5-6).

David trusted God in the present, knowing that he would “sing to the Lord” in the future, because of all God had done in the past. All that God has done, God can still do. All of God there is, is in this moment.

Do you need to pray Psalm 13 today? Is there a problem or fear from that God seems distant? a circumstance that appears beyond God’s presence and power? Give God your pain, in bold honesty. Tell God how you feel. Then remember what God has done for you in the past and trust that God will do it again. God will give you what you ask or something better.

**Trust God when God does not answer (Psalm 22)**

We all face times when our pain is great and it seems God is not present. But then there are times when it seems God does not even hear us, that God has turned a deaf ear to our cries. Sometimes the fault is ours. Our prayers are not heartfelt or intentional, just rote words that bounce back off the ceiling. Shakespeare described the feeling:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:  
Words without thoughts never to heaven go (*Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 3).

But sometimes we are praying with all the urgency and honesty in our souls, and still it seems that God does not hear us. A father cries out to God over a terminally-ill child. A mother pleads for help with a rebellious daughter. A pastor begs God to bring spiritual renewal to his stagnated church. A soldier’s mother earnestly prays for her child’s safety. But there are times when it feels that the heavens are empty, the throne room vacant.

David had been there. He knew what it was to feel forsaken from God (Ps. 22:1). As David said, “I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent” (22:2). But God is silent.

At such a time, we do well to remember who our Lord truly is: “you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel” (22:3). We also do well to remind ourselves of
what God has done: “In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed” (22:4-5). He saved the Hebrews from Egypt through the Exodus, and from the Canaanites when they took the land. He provided for their needs in the wilderness and in their new home. What God has done, God can still do.

So David could trust his silent God to speak and bless: “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you” (22:22). He could call the nation to join his worship (22:23), for “he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help” (22:24). Somehow the king had sensed God’s presence and compassion in his pain and knew that he could trust God for his uncertain future.

You and I are allowed to pray with such honesty, and we are encouraged to come to such faith. If Jesus could make this psalm his own, so can we. From the cross Jesus cried out the first words of Psalm 22: “About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ “ (Matthew 27:46; see Mark 15:34).

In a culture where long passages of Scripture were memorized as a part of the basic educational process, Jesus knew that his hearers would instantly recall the rest of Psalm 22. As they did, they would recite the most vivid and specific prediction of his crucifixion imaginable. Consider the following statements in Psalm 22 and their parallels at Calvary.

The mocking of the crowds:

All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:
“He trusts in the Lord;
let the Lord rescue him.
Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him” (Ps. 22:7-8).

In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him (Matt. 27:41-44).

His thirst on the cross:

My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth (Ps. 22:15).
Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips (John 19:28-29).

His crucifixion:

Dogs have surrounded me;
a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced my hands and my feet (Ps. 22:16).

Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). Here they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle (John 19:16-18).

His bones unbroken:

I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me (Ps. 22:17).

Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken,” and, as another scripture says, “They will look on the one they have pierced” (John 19:31-37).

His clothing taken:

They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing (Ps. 22:18).

When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots (Matt. 27:35).

Jesus could cite this psalm of pain and suffering, knowing that his death would end with the victory that David claimed:
Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord.  
They will proclaim his righteousness  
to a people yet unborn—  
for he has done it (Ps. 22:30-31).

The God who seemed to be deaf to Jesus’ cries would in fact redeem Jesus’ suffering for the salvation of humankind. David’s prayer would be fulfilled beyond David’s imagination.

Does it seem that God has not heard your prayer, your cry or plea? Keep praying. Keep trusting. And know that God never wastes a hurt, that God will always give his child what is best.

Conclusion
This week’s study invites your class members to be honest with the Lord. Sunday School classes sometimes are not known for their transparency, as we dress up and act religious with one another. Perhaps you can encourage those you teach to be as real with God as were David and Jesus. We cannot follow better models of genuine spirituality.

In fact, David wanted the congregation to join him in using Psalm 22 in worship. He dedicated it “for the director of music,” referring to the Levites leading the services of the people. He even specified the hymn tune, “The Doe of the Morning.” Like other hymn tunes (see Ps. 45; 56—60; 69; 75; 80), this one has been lost through the centuries. It must have been familiar so that the people could use it in singing these words to God. (We do the same thing when we sing new words to such tunes as “Amazing Grace.”)

So the great King David invites us to join his honesty in our prayers and petitions to God. Tell the Lord how you feel, for the Lord already knows your mind and heart. Set aside the words you would use in polite company, and be real with your Father. Take Shakespeare’s advice to heart: “Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (King Lear, Act 5, Scene 3).

When last did you pray like this? When will you next?

1 James C. Denison, Life on the Brick Pile: Answers to Suffering from the Letters of Revelation (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997), 1.