

This is our fourth week in this series we're calling *A Summer in the Psalms*. Throughout July and August we're examining these poetic verses of Scripture- they're songs really- not just for their beauty or to simply enjoy hearing them read, but as an attempt to dig deeper and to learn from them. Though they were written several thousand years ago, when we invest our attention in them we find that these psalms are instructive and insightful for us today.

### **Psalm 30**

A psalm of David. A song for the dedication of the Temple.

**1** *I will exalt you, Lord, for you rescued me. You refused to let my enemies triumph over me.*  
**2** *O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you restored my health.*  
**3** *You brought me up from the grave, O Lord. You kept me from falling into the pit of death.*  
**4** *Sing to the Lord, all you godly ones! Praise his holy name.*  
**5** *For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime! Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning.*  
**6** *When I was prosperous, I said, "Nothing can stop me now!"*  
**7** *Your favor, O Lord, made me as secure as a mountain. Then you turned away from me, and I was shattered.*  
**8** *I cried out to you, O Lord. I begged the Lord for mercy, saying,*  
**9** *"What will you gain if I die, if I sink into the grave? Can my dust praise you? Can it tell of your faithfulness?"*  
**10** *Hear me, Lord, and have mercy on me. Help me, O Lord."*  
**11** *You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy,*  
**12** *that I might sing praises to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever!*

When our creative team was planning this series, I knew this one (Psalm 30) was what I wanted to teach on. I felt like this chapter would allow me to share from my life's experiences and my words would have depth and would resonate because my family have recently walked the path David is writing about. But what I discovered this week as I was preparing is David's path through suffering and my experiences with it are very different from each other.

There's nothing more certain than suffering- that you or, at the very least, someone you know will endure suffering. Disease, death, disaster & disappointment- the four "D's" of suffering.

Scholars don't agree on exactly what events in David's life led him to write these verses. Some say that it was written in response to a plague that Israel experienced. It's recorded for us in 2 Samuel 24. 70,000 people died. It was a huge tragedy and it was all brought on by the fact that David had done something he should not have done. So David was responsible and he wrote these words once the plague had ended. But I don't think those events bear enough similarity to what David is describing in these verses. David is talking here about his own health. He was very sick- he nearly died- there's no reference to a plague or the suffering of the nation.

Then there's the curious caption at the top of the chapter: "A song for the dedication of the Temple." You may be aware that God refused to allow David to build the temple. Solomon, David's son, was the one who saw that project through to completion, so there's definitely some question as to what prompted the writing of these verses. All we can say with certainty is that David had experienced a time of pain from which he cried out to God, saying, **9** *"What will you gain if I die, if I sink into the grave? Can my dust praise you? Can it tell of your faithfulness?"*

Essentially David was asking God, “Why?” “Why are you letting this happen?”

When you suffer, it’s so natural to ask the question: “Why?” In fact, instinctively, sometimes the first thing out of our mouths when tragedy hits is, “Why me?” “Why now?” “Why this?” “Why him or her?”

When suffering hits there are two basic ways that people respond. The more religious person might respond with questions like, “Why is God punishing me?” or “What did I do wrong?” “Should I have prayed more? Did I need to go to church more?” Sadly, there are a good number of people in the church that say, “If you’re sick, you don’t have enough faith. If you’re in financial trouble you need to have more faith.” This is the religious person’s response to suffering. If you start doing the right things and stop doing the wrong things and pray a lot more maybe God will bless you.

The other approach to suffering is more cynical. Where the religious person sees suffering as a punishment, the cynical person (or you could say: the secular person) will tend to see suffering as just the randomness of life. Life is random. Stuff happens.

Secular people, when they see suffering, they tend to say, “See, this proves there is no God. Or, if there is a God, he is incompetent or indifferent.” It’s a cynical view. Suffering shows that there is no God, or if there is, the heck with him if allows this sort of evil and pain. These are the two approaches: religious and cynical.

This psalm, (psalm 30) and David’s experiences that caused him to write the psalm, are evidence that both of these approaches to suffering are incorrect. They’re both wrong. They’re spiritual dead ends.

The relationship between God and suffering is complex. No other philosophy or religion of the world contains Scripture’s particular perspective about God’s relationship to sin and suffering. So what is it?

On the one hand, notice that God isn’t the one causing the suffering. David writes, “**6** *When I was prosperous, I said, “Nothing can stop me now!”* **7** *Your favor, O Lord, made me as secure as a mountain. Then you turned away from me, and I was shattered.*” Notice that God isn’t the one causing the suffering, but He allowed it.

I said this was complex, so follow me because David is getting across an important fact. When God made the world He didn’t make disease in it. He didn’t include natural disasters as a part of His great design. That’s not the world God made. It wasn’t a place of death. Disease, disaster, death and disappointment are not things God actually made. They are in this world, but He did not direct them into being. They are forces of darkness that were unleashed when we turned away from God. When we rebelled against God the fabric of this world began to unravel. We unleashed these forces. They are the consequence of our rebellion and sin; they are not a product of God’s design.

On the one hand we see that God is not actively, deliberately creating the suffering that we experience in this life. However, God is in absolute control. What we don’t have is some sort of cosmic tug-o-war where equal forces are waging battle against one another and it’s up for grabs. No. God is totally in charge. He permits suffering. He does.

Now, we might ask the question, why? Why does God allow this? Here's the answer. God only allows suffering, this opposing force in our lives, to accomplish what He wants to accomplish in our lives. Suffering comes into our lives, and this is not a part of God's design, but He is still in total control and He uses our experiences to accomplish what He wants to accomplish in our lives. David has this near death experience and what does he say? *You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, 12 that I might sing praises to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever!*

What this is telling us is two things. First that this is the way God works. He hates suffering and evil, but on the other hand He's in total control. You can't say that God can't help it. He permits suffering. Of course he does, because He's totally in charge. But on the other hand you can't say that God loves seeing people suffer. He doesn't. He hates it, and it was not a part of His design. He only permits it to the degree that it will accomplish His purpose in this world and in our lives.

The second thing we learn is that even David did not understand the reason he was suffering. David didn't receive an answer to the "Why" question. God never comes to David and says, "Listen, this has been a really tough stretch for you, I know, but do you realize that your life and your example are going speak to people for generation after generation. So you see this is all for the best..." God never says that to David.

The religious person says that we suffer because we're not living our lives right- we need more faith. And the cynic says we suffer because stuff just happens and God's out to lunch. Those are pat answers. They're too clever by half. How do they know? They don't. Their answers are simply a device that allows them the illusion of remaining in control.

The cynic says, "See, life is bad. Look at all the evil and suffering God is allowing. You can live your life any way you want. You owe God nothing." And the religious person says, "Well if you do this and this and this then God will have to bless you." But Scripture tells us that we should serve God even though we'll never know the answer why. We serve God even though we may never know the reason behind our suffering. We maintain a relationship with a God whom we cannot control.

Now, do you know *why* we don't need to understand the reason behind our suffering?

Listen, have you ever had someone in your life who was friendly and available to you- until they figured out that you were not going to give them what they wanted and then they were gone? Have you ever experienced that? Maybe you've worked in an environment where someone who was a little farther down the ladder was really friendly and loyal to you, until they realized you weren't going to be able to open any doors for them and then they were gone. You weren't being loved for yourself- you were being networked. How do we feel at a moment like that? We feel used and devalued because we've been manipulated.

If you want to be a truly compassionate person instead of a manipulator; if you want to be a person of integrity; a person of principle- you've got to learn how to love God for who He is Himself; alone. The only way that's ever going to happen, the only way we're ever going to learn to love God in that way is through suffering.

I've had people say to me, "I could handle this pain if God would only show me exactly why." If God would just come to us and say, "Oh, you are experiencing a real hardship now, but in five

years x will happen and in 10 years y will happen.” Don’t you see, in that scenario we merely love God for what we can get out of Him? The only way to be sure that you’re serving God for Himself, alone, rather than for what we get out of Him, is to remain faithful even when our circumstances are painful.

If you really want to learn how to love God for Himself, alone- not manipulating Him or attempting to exploit Him- then you have to be willing to hold on to your faith in the face of suffering. We are being called to stay in a relationship with a God that we can’t control. We’re being called to embrace the mystery of not knowing why we suffer. When we do this, we demonstrate to God that we love Him for Himself, alone.

How do we walk this path?

In David’s time of crying out to God for rescue he gets pretty emotional. **9** *“What will you gain if I die, if I sink into the grave? Can my dust praise you? Can it tell of your faithfulness? 10 Hear me, Lord, and have mercy on me. Help me, O Lord.”* But in all of that he never loses sight of God’s grace. What does David say? He doesn’t say, “What you’re taking from me is mine! I deserve to keep what is mine! How dare you take it away?” What does he say? **11** *You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, 12 that I might sing praises to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever!*

David acknowledges that what he’s experiencing is a gift from a gracious God. He says, *“You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, 12 that I might sing praises to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever!”*

Let me tell you why it’s absolutely crucial to grab hold of God’s grace when you’re suffering. If you build your life on your things; if you say, “the thing that makes me who I am is that I’ve worked hard for this position, this name, this physique, this achievement”- suffering will pull you away from the source of your happiness. That’s what suffering is; it always takes away something important to us.

So, if we build our life on things, suffering will make us sadder and sadder, angrier and angrier, worse and worse. But if, like David, we choose to build our life on the grace of God, (we certainly enjoy what we have- but the ultimate love of our lives is God’s love) then suffering will drive us deeper and deeper into the source of our joy. If you build your life on things, suffering pulls you away from the source of your happiness, but if you build your life on the grace of God, suffering will draw you ever closer to Him.

That’s the reason David was described as a man after God’s own heart. Because when he suffered; when he was afraid; when he was desperate he always drew closer to God.

So, go out and be like David! No, listen. When David got a hold of grace, he didn’t have a whole lot to go with. All he knew was that his health was restored. If God wants to take stuff away, He’s God and He has the right to do that. That’s rational and it’s right, but David didn’t have nearly the resource to understand grace that we do.

Let me tell you about the resource that we have that David did not. In the Garden of Eden, Satan came to us (humanity) and says, “God doesn’t really love you.” Adam and Eve replied, “We’re not supposed to eat from the tree because God said not to, and God really loves us.” What does Satan say? “You must be kidding. He’s using you. That tree’s perfectly good to eat from. He’s just trying to keep you down and exploit you.”

Now listen, when Satan said bad things to us about God, even when there was no truth in it, we believed it. The lie of Satan is, if you give yourself to God completely and utterly- if you totally trust Him- He'll crush you. You won't be happy. You can't trust God. God doesn't really love you. That's the lie of our adversary. It sank into the hearts of Adam and Eve, and it has sunk into the heart of every human being.

You know the reason why we can't handle bad news? You know why, when suffering comes, we immediately think the worst of God? Let me speak for myself. My main problem in life is I don't really believe that God loves me. Maybe you're thinking, "Wait a second! You tell us every chance you can that God love us. Are you some kind of hypocrite?!" No, listen. I know it up here (brain). But I'm not as certain, as this is my right hand, that the Lord of the universe loves me unconditionally. I don't know that in my heart of hearts.

Deep down, when bad things happen- when it really hurts and the question comes into my head: "Why?"- it becomes more than an intellectual exercise. The reason I can't handle suffering is because I believe the lie of our adversary, "God doesn't really love you."

The biggest thing we need is proof that He loves us. The thing that will allow us to handle whatever is thrown at us in this life- to walk the path of suffering without knowing exactly why it's happening- is proof that God loves us. To become people of greatness, like David, we need to see that Satan is a liar and our God loves us. How can we know it?

Many centuries after David, there was another who experienced suffering. He was an innocent sufferer who died naked and crying out, "Why? Why am I suffering?" and he received no answer. It was Jesus, but keep this in mind. When David suffered, he was not innocent (last week: Bathsheba), but when Jesus went to the cross he was absolutely an innocent sufferer. And when David felt God had turned away from him forever, He hadn't. God was there for David and turned his mourning to joy. But Jesus was truly abandoned by God. In fact, Jesus is the only person in history to whom God said, "If you obey me fully, I will crush you to powder and remove myself from your presence completely. I will turn my back on you and you'll experience absolute separation from the glory and the face of the Father." God has never said that to any other human being but Jesus.

Jesus was the only person who ever served God truly for nothing. Why did He do it? For us! That's our proof. For those of us who are suffering and we have no idea why. That's what we need. To see that Jesus was the ultimate innocent sufferer. Because when he died on the cross for us, it proves that God does love us. Satan is a liar. God in human form was willing to love us just for who we are, ourselves. He received nothing in return. Jesus already had all the glory, why did he love us? Because of what he would get in return? No. He loved us for who we are, ourselves- so we must go out and love Him for who He is, Himself.

Jesus suffered, not so that we wouldn't suffer, but that when we suffer we can become like Him.

And so, we say along with David:

**3** *You brought me up from the grave, O Lord. You kept me from falling into the pit of death.*

**4** *Sing to the Lord, all you godly ones! Praise his holy name.*

**5** *For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime! Weeping may last through the*

*night, but joy comes with the morning.*