

**Songs of the Heart:  
WHEN YOU FEEL ABANDONED...**

**Psalm 22:1-5, 23-24**

*Trust in the Lord through all your trials.*

A sermon preached by  
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The story of the summer so far has been the entrapment and rescue of 12 Thai boys and their soccer coach from a flooded cave in Thailand. Did you follow that story? On June 23, the soccer team and their coach decided after practice to go into a local cave just to look around. After an hour, it was time to go home. But water rushing into the cave from heavy rains on the surface blocked their way. They were trapped, with no communication possible to the outside.

An international team assembled to try to rescue the boys. They frantically pumped water out of the cave to keep it from filling and drowning the boys. The boys, who had no food, survived by drinking water dripping in the cave. After 8 days, British divers finally found the boys. But it took 10 more days to plan and execute a dangerous underwater rescue with military divers and boys who couldn't swim. Finally, after 18 days in the dark and wet cave, all 12 boys and their coach were rescued. As the last boy left the cave, the pump malfunctioned, and the cave filled with water. The last of the rescuers barely made it out alive.<sup>1</sup>

Can you imagine being trapped like that for days on end? How hopeless and abandoned they must have felt before the divers found them. How anxious and frightened they must have been waiting for over a week to actually be rescued. Thank God for the courage and teamwork of the rescuers.

Life has its scary times, doesn't it? We are not strangers to those feelings of fear, anxiety, and even despair.

Maybe you have never been trapped in a flooded cave. But you probably have dealt with a debilitating illness or the loss of a loved one. Maybe you're going through a divorce. Maybe you've lost a job or are looking for one. Maybe your enemies are attacking you, and they are winning. Maybe your life is just out of whack for any number of reasons. It's just not fair. It's just not fun! Sometimes we just feel abandoned and alone.

The Book of Psalms understands these negative feelings. As you read through the Psalms, you'll find the full spectrum of human

emotions: joy, exultation, love, and devotion on one hand, anger, bitterness, fear, self-pity and hatred on the other. The Psalms reflect the entire human condition, and it's not always pretty. The Psalmist, whoever it might be, is honest enough in his (or her) relationship with God to bring those emotions to the table and lay them out before the Lord. Sometimes the first step in overcoming the negative parts of our lives is to be honest enough to acknowledge them.

Psalm 22 contains one of the greatest cries of desperation in all of God's Word: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"<sup>2</sup> If we're honest, sometimes things get so bad we have to wonder. Has God forsaken us? Has the Lord abandoned us or forgotten us? Is there a God at all, and does God even care for us?

This verse in Psalm 22 is even more famous because Jesus said these words from the cross. As he was being crucified, experiencing the most intense pain imaginable, struggling with all his might for each and every breath, he cried out in anguish, "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!*" which is the Aramaic translation of Psalm 22:1, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"<sup>3</sup> I don't believe there are any more heart-breaking words in all of Scripture than these that come from the lips of the Son of God. What can this mean?

Over the years, scholars have debated the meaning of Jesus quoting these words on the cross. Had God really abandoned him? Did God withdraw his Spirit from Jesus and literally leave him hanging in his hour of need? Not at all. Jesus was following the Jewish custom of quoting the first line of a psalm or scripture text as a way of calling to mind the whole passage for the hearers, since many of them knew the Scripture by heart.<sup>4</sup> If he had had more breath, he might have said, "Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 22, and apply that Scripture to this situation."

The wonderful thing is, when you read all of Psalm 22, it is not a psalm of abandonment or despair at all. There are feelings of persecution, and a graphic description of the triumph of the enemies. But the rest of the psalm is a great hymn of trust. For the Psalmist going

through a time of tremendous trial, there is restoration. There is healing. There is deliverance. The faithful one triumphs in the end. Jesus never lost his faith, and Jesus never lost his God!

So let's look at how Psalm 22 teaches us to deal with the difficult times in our lives.

First of all, **MAINTAIN YOUR PERSONAL INTEGRITY.** Keep your character above question, and you will withstand any trouble that comes your way. Integrity is a congruence between your inner beliefs and your outer actions, a life that is one piece (integrated) inside and out. Jesus maintained his personal integrity all the way to the cross, never compromising God's message and mission, never giving in to temptation, never taking the selfish way. This is the first ingredient to a life that is victorious.

Tony Dungy is known as a man of great personal integrity and Christian character. He is the first African-American football coach to take his team, the Indianapolis Colts, to a victory in the Super Bowl. That was a great victory and the culmination of a long journey. That journey included Tony Dungy getting fired from one team as head coach, resigning from another, and the suicide of his son James. Through the trials, he said, "it was hard to remember God's promise from Romans 8:28, that all things work together for good to those who love him. But I also tried to remember the promise in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9—that despite all of our troubles, God will never abandon us. What we often see as defeat is frequently the stage being set for a comeback."

Tony Dungy's comeback came on February 4, 2007, when the Indianapolis Colts became the world champions of professional football. Reflecting on his son's death and then the Super Bowl victory a year later, Dungy said, "Both of these events have given me the opportunity to grow in my faith. I have been touched by so many people who have reached out to me to express their own experiences, their triumphs as well as their tragedies. And because of my experiences, I have been able to help them. I can tell them in no uncertain terms that

despite these ups and downs, God is with us. God is for us. He won't ever abandon us.”<sup>5</sup> To win the victory over your enemies, maintain your personal integrity.

Secondly, when you feel abandoned, **TRUST THE LORD FOR YOUR STRENGTH.** If all we have to rely on is our own resources, we are in deep trouble. But the good news is, we have a Source bigger and higher and deeper and wider than any trouble in the world, and God is here for us, no matter what.

The problem with problems is that they wear us out. Trouble tires us. Trials sap our strength. Tribulations suck the wind out of our sails and leave us with an incredible soul-weariness that leaves us broken and weak and near despair.

The Psalmist draws strength as he remembers the faithful ones of the past. They depended on God, and God brought them through their trial. *“In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.”*<sup>6</sup>

The Psalmist's own experience is the same. Despite the enemies, despite the suffering, despite the feelings of doubt and abandonment, God has delivered him: *“For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.”*<sup>7</sup> The message is clear for us today. Don't give up. Don't despair. When you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on! God will not forget you. God will take care of you. Trust in the Lord for your strength.

One of the most beloved hymns from the great gospel era is “It Is Well With My Soul.” It was written by a man named Horatio Spafford in a moment when he needed God's strength desperately. Mr. Spafford was a highly successful lawyer in Chicago in the years following the civil war. He was also a dedicated Christian layman. But in his forties, his life turned suddenly disastrous. His only son died unexpectedly. He lost a fortune in real estate in the great Chicago fire of 1871. By 1873, he had recovered enough to take his family on a trip to Europe. He was

going to assist Dwight L. Moody, the evangelist, in a revival campaign in England.

Just before his family was to leave, some business matters came up that Spafford had to deal with. So he sent his wife and four daughters ahead, and he would catch up. On November 22, 1873, the ship carrying his wife and daughters was struck by another ship at sea and sank in twelve minutes. When the survivors landed in Wales, Spafford's wife sent her husband a two-word telegram, "Saved alone."

As quickly as he could, Horatio Spafford booked passage to join his bereaved wife. As the ship passed the point in the ocean, the captain pointed out to Horatio that somewhere near that spot, on the bottom of the sea, lay the ship that had carried all four of his daughters to a watery grave. For a long time, this heartbroken father leaned over the rail and looked into the deep, deep water. Then, without a word, he turned and walked to his cabin, took up his pen, and let these words flow out of the depths of a grieving heart:

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll,  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*<sup>8</sup>

How is it with your soul today? Where do you find strength to live, whatever your lot might be?

Those hymn words remind me of one of my favorite verses of Scripture. In Philippians, Paul says, "*I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*"<sup>9</sup> Paul found strength; Horatio Spafford found strength; the Psalmist found strength by trusting in the Lord.

Finally, when you feel lost and abandoned, you can overcome your troubles if you **HAVE FAITH IN GOD'S ULTIMATE VICTORY**. Let's face it; sometimes the good guys don't win. Enemies seem to rule

the day. The wicked prosper. Justice doesn't seem to happen in this world. But there's the key. Maybe things don't always work out in this life, but this life is not all there is to life. God has a bigger scope, a larger perspective, an infinity of time and space to work with. We are playing on a very large field, and no matter what we experience or perceive in our little world, we know by faith that God will ultimately have the victory.

One of the scariest moments in my experience as a parent happened in the "happiest place in the world"—Disney World. We took our boys down there, and the MGM part of Disney World had recently opened. One of the attractions was based on the movie, "Honey, I Shrank the Kids." There were giant insects, doughnuts, tin cans, and foliage that the kids could crawl on, in, and through. The boys wanted to go exploring. The whole structure was enclosed by a fence, so we let them go, with a promise to stay together. Right.

The place looked like an anthill with all the kids crawling all over. In a few minutes, my older son, who was about 8 at the time, came running up with a look of panic on his face. He had lost his little brother, who was 4! So we all set out to find our missing child. We were relatively sure he was OK somewhere, but you never know in a strange place. There are lots of creepy people around. Even more, we were worried that John would be upset at being lost.

After a few panic-stricken minutes, we found him, calmly sitting on a giant mushroom, without a care in the world. We rushed up breathlessly to make sure he was OK, and we discovered that his preschool teacher had told him if he ever got lost, just to stay in one place, and he would be found. I don't remember his exact words, but it was something like, "I knew you would come looking for me."

When we feel abandoned, we don't have to panic. Be still, and know that God is looking for you. Ultimately, the victory belongs to God. Evil will be destroyed, and good will triumph. That is our hope. We draw strength for today because we know what will happen tomorrow.

In Psalm 22, the Psalmist finishes the song with an ascending spiral of praise. Starting with verse 22 and going through the end, he celebrates the deliverance he has experienced. First he's going to tell his friends and family, then he's going to share the good news with the congregation at the Temple. Then the whole world will begin to praise the Lord, and not only this world but the world of the dead as well. Even future generations yet unborn will join in the mighty chorus of praise to a God who delivers us from trouble. Hallelujah!

So are you feeling abandoned today? Are there situations with your health, your family, your job, your relationships that make you think maybe God has forgotten to look out for you lately? Remember Jesus. On the cross he cried out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" But his last words from the cross were "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.*"<sup>10</sup>

If you're feeling lost or abandoned today (or any day), commit your spirit to God. Trust in God. God is already here with you. This trial will pass. Maintain your personal integrity. Turn to the Lord for strength. Have faith in God's final victory. And you will live to praise God again.

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<sup>1</sup> "Thai soccer team recounts cave crisis," *Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, July 19, 2018, 5A, and multiple online news sources.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 22:1.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 27:46.

<sup>4</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 105.

<sup>5</sup> Michael W. Michelsen Jr., "Gentle Warrior," *Today's Christian* (September/October 2007). Also used 7/31/2011.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 22:4.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 22:24.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982), 127.

<sup>9</sup> Philippians 4:11-13.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 23:46.