

Always Close

In times of suffering or stress, we may feel that God is against us or doesn't care. Yet God hears our cries and acts to restore wholeness, not only to individuals, but to the whole community and beyond. When discipleship includes suffering and rejection, God is faithful and does not hide. God keeps promises; we respond in faith and thanksgiving.

Focus Scripture: Psalm 22:23–31

Psalm 22 is the prayer of one who is afflicted. It begins with lament – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” God has cared for the people of Israel over centuries. Why does it seem that God has abandoned the psalmist now? This psalm is frequently read during worship on Good Friday, as Jesus spoke these opening words from the cross (see Mark 15:34).

Lament psalms, though they express human pain and suffering, usually end by expressing thanks that God delivers from trouble. The portion of Psalm 22 we read today is just such a hymn of praise. With exuberance that may seem surprising – given the depth of despair described in the earlier verses – the psalmist proclaims that God does not despise those who are afflicted. God is always close and is with those who are in distress.

This psalm reminds us that, though we are in an individual relationship with God, we are also part of a community of faith. The psalmist comes to the faith community, praising God “in the great congregation.” God's people are not meant to undergo suffering alone, but to find strength through shared story and experience of God's saving presence.

Verse 23 is an example of the parallelism so characteristic of Hebrew poetry: “All you offspring of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah, glorify God; stand in awe of God, all you offspring of Israel!” (NRSV Inclusive Language Version). The people to whom God gave the name “Israel” are called to praise God, who has acted through their history and will continue to act to bring wholeness and salvation. More than that, “all the families of the nations” will worship God. God's rule extends to the entire world. Past, present, and future – “those who sleep in the earth” and “people yet unborn” – all generations praise God.

Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16 also speaks to trust in God's promises. Abram and Sarai are childless; yet God makes a covenant, promising Abram he will be the ancestor of many nations. Through Sarai's son, God's everlasting promise will extend to a multitude. The new names, Abraham and Sarah, signify their new status as God's covenant people.

Romans 4:13–25 recalls God's covenant with Abraham. Abraham responded to God's promise in faith and trust, “hoping against hope” that God's promise was true. Like the psalmist, Abraham's hope was in God's trustworthy goodness. Paul exhorts readers to have such faith in God's saving love through Christ.

In **Mark 8:31–38**, Jesus and his disciples are near Caesarea Philippi. For the first time, Jesus teaches that he will suffer and die. Peter cannot believe this; this is not what was expected of God's messiah. Jesus rebukes Peter and challenges the entire crowd to consider what it means to follow Jesus and trust in God's saving love. Following this account is the story of the Transfiguration (**Mark 9:2–9**), an alternative gospel reading for today. Peter, James, and John accompany Jesus up the mountain after Jesus' teaching about his pending suffering and death. They are terrified as God confirms Jesus' identity as God's Son, and tells them to listen to Jesus.

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The psalmist declares that God hears our cries and does not turn from us. God's people today join in declaring that God keeps promises and reigns over all. Is it easy or difficult for you to trust that God is present in all situations in life? In what ways do you, as an individual and as a church, demonstrate your confidence that God is able to do as God has promised?

March 8, 2009

Focus Scripture
Psalm 22:23–31

Additional Scriptures
Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16
Romans 4:13–25
Mark 8:31–38
or Mark 9:2–9

Praise to you, God
of our salvation.
You do not hide
your face from
us. When we are
in trouble, you
come near to us.
Give us comfort
and strength, that
we may proclaim
your goodness and
always rejoice in
your help. Amen.

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for connections between
current events and the
focus passage.

