

When God Seems to Have Deserted You

BOB HEERSPINK

Have you ever felt like worship is dishonest? You stand in the pews clapping your hands, singing peppy songs because the worship leader says: Hey, let's celebrate Jesus! But in your heart, you are sad or you are angry because of some news that you got this past week. How do you pray? How do you worship when the emotions on the outside don't seem to match the emotions that you are feeling on the inside? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

So, Bob, I thought that was a great question: What happens when what we are feeling inside because of things that we have experienced doesn't match the mood that we are encouraged to exhibit on the outside?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; sometimes I have come to worship, and here is the worship leader saying: We are all just so happy to be here in worship today; and I am thinking: Really? You know, I look to the teenager down the way whose parents dragged him to church...

DAVE BAST

Right; he doesn't look too happy.

BOB HEERSPINK

He doesn't look too happy. I look around the corner in the other direction and there is someone just coming in who I know has just lost their job this past week. You know, they are being chewed up by life; and I say: All these people are really that happy about being here?

DAVE BAST

I never forgot one particular worship service... I was just a little kid and it was a communion service, and I noticed an elderly lady sitting near us who just wept through the whole thing. I didn't know enough then to realize what was going on, but I am sure she was grieving her loss, and that just so brought it back to her. So we need to beware – those of us who are called to lead public worship – we need to beware of telling people how they should be feeling.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and I think sometimes we really have done a disservice to the Gospel, and to people who are seriously seeking the faith when we project this image that, hey, if you are a Christian, you are a happy Christian. You know, there is just this one emotional mode that we all get into if we walk with Jesus: I am a Christian and I am so happy all the time. I think there are people who back off from the Gospel because they say: You know, that is not real. That is not being honest about life. I need a faith that really takes life more seriously than that.

DAVE BAST

But here is a question, and I know you haven't rehearsed this, so you might not have an answer, but should worship reflect the way we feel or should it challenge us to feel different – to transcend the way we may be feeling?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think it does both. I think it engages people where they are at, and then moves them forward. I mean, it brings the Gospel to bear on life, but it does that, not just if you've got reason to celebrate because you've got that phone call saying: Hey, you got the promotion this week; or you've got that new job; but it also has to engage the person who is there saying: You know what? My engagement just broke up. My life has been turned upside down; or my business failed this past week. So, it has to acknowledge the broad variety of emotions and struggles and joys that we bring to worship, and then allow the Gospel to address them all.

DAVE BAST

We are talking about being honest, really – honestly engaging our feelings in worship or in prayer, because we are talking about the Psalms in this series, and the Psalms are ways of praying; they are teaching us how to pray, how to sing, how to worship. Do you think there are ever things that we should not say to God? Is there anything that we should... you know?

BOB HEERSPINK

It is interesting, we asked the social media question: Is there anything you shouldn't say to God? It was interesting, a respondent said: You shouldn't ask for selfish things...

DAVE BAST

Okay.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you really shouldn't ask for a good bowling score. You should just accept the gutter balls as they come...

DAVE BAST

Right; but let me change the question a little bit: Are there any emotions that we should not express to God?

BOB HEERSPINK

No; no, I think the answer is no; and I have said to people going through hard times: You know what? You are just hiding your emotions from God, but he knows how you are feeling; and when we hide our emotions from God, that is when our relationship with God becomes, I think, very unreal. It is like any human relationship. If I have a friendship and I am not really telling my friend what I am really thinking or feeling, we become distant, and the same thing happens if we don't share all our feelings – the good stuff *and* the bad stuff – with God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is interesting, you mentioned social media, and Tim responded this way online to that question: The first thing I learned was to be truthful with him. If he already knows my heart and is willing to heal it, I might as well be honest with myself and him. The truth will set you free, not lies or hiding.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes. I think we have to understand that God is big enough to take it. You know, God is a God who can handle anything that we throw at him. So, to lay on him where we really are at in life is not only okay, but it is exactly what he asks of his children. When I say to my kids: Hey, tell me how you are doing. I don't want them to pull punches on me. I want them to really tell me where it is at. That is what it means for me to be a father to my kids; and that is what God wants us to do as well.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is interesting, I think, to reflect on the difference between the true God and false gods in that respect. I mean, in the Old Testament days the worshipers of Baal had to maintain a real nice, cheerful front all the time. They had to get what they wanted from him, and to do that they had to kind of soft-soap him, but the living God – we can afford to be honest with him; and maybe to put it in contemporary terms – some of our idols – if you are worshiping success or you are worshiping climbing the pole and reaching the top, you have to put on a false front; you cannot afford to let people know what you are really feeling and how it is with you inside, but if you worship the living God, you can be completely honest with him.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly; but that is where we need help because this does not come so easily to us. We are doing a series on the Psalms, Dave, and the Psalms really help us to get honest with God about the tough stuff in life. You know, God gives us words to speak to him. There are times when we say: I don't know what to say... I don't know how to pray because life is such a mess. Well, the Psalms come along and say: Try these words. These will work.

We will take a break, and after we come back we should talk about one of those Psalms.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. Along with my co-host, Bob Heerspink, I am Dave Bast, and Bob, just before the break you were talking about how the Psalms can give us words to say to be honest with God, and to be honest in our worship when we are not necessarily feeling happy or cheerful. In fact, there is a whole category of psalms called psalms of lament, and that is a note that is often absent from Evangelical worship at least, as in my experience. The idea that sometimes we need to bring our sorrow before God. Even in public worship we need to lament – we need to express lamentation. In fact, there is a book of the Bible called Lamentations.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, loss is part of life, and lament is giving expression to that loss. When we lament, we grieve what we no longer have. That is something, I think, Dave, that we have minimized in our society, even as Christians.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; you know, all of us know how to pray during the crisis when we are praying for healing for a loved one, when we are praying salvation from some situation – from some dire calamity or danger that we are facing; but what happens when the answer to that prayer is no? When the loved one dies; when the business fails; when salvation does not come in earthly terms; how do you pray then; and the answer that the Bible gives is: Lamentation – you *lament*. Lamentations in the Old Testament was written after the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. It is the expression of faith that just gives voice to the sorrow we feel when God says: No. Maybe the greatest of all the psalms of lament is the 22nd Psalm.

¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me; so far from my cries of anguish? ²My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer; by night, but I find no rest.

BOB HEERSPINK

⁶But I am a worm, not a human being. I am scorned by everyone, despised by the people. ⁷All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. ⁸“He trusts in the Lord,” they say, “Let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him since he delights in him.”

DAVE BAST

¹¹Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. ¹²Many bulls surround me, strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. ¹³Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against me. ¹⁴I am poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint.

BOB HEERSPINK

My heart has turned to wax; it is melted within me. ¹⁵My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. You lay me in the dust of death.

DAVE BAST

¹⁷All my bones are on display. People stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Dave, that psalm is the most famous psalm of lament because it is obviously a psalm that Jesus took to himself upon the cross.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; it reads in part like one of the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion; I mean, it is all there: The taunting of the crowds who laughed at him and mocked him and said: Come down – if you are the Christ, come down from the cross. The thirst that he felt; Jesus said, “I thirst,” and here it speaks of his parched mouth and throat; all his bones are kept – not one of them is broken. John pointed and quoted that verse as being fulfilled on the cross.

BOB HEERSPINK

And his prayer – his prayer from the cross: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Now, we think of that as a cry, but in the light of this psalm, it really becomes an address to God; and Jesus takes those words upon himself; and I think, in so doing really implies that this whole psalm speaks of him.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; it is hard for me to understand how anybody could read this psalm and not see the cross, how clearly it seems to point there; and I sometimes have wondered whether Paul had a passage like this in mind when he said that people who don't believe in Christ, their minds are veiled when they read the Old Testament. They cannot see it somehow; they are blind to the significance; and surely that opening verse is the key to the whole psalm: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? People have puzzled over that ever since Jesus spoke the words.

BOB HEERSPINK

But now, here is the thing, Dave; the fact that Jesus takes upon himself this psalm of lament I think speaks to the fact that we as Christians are also invited to bring our laments to God. You know, here is Jesus, and he is going through this incredible experience – this crucible of suffering for our salvation; but this is not a happy time, and you know, Jesus is honest with God. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? As you say, those are mysterious words that point to his God-forsakenness, which is at the root of our salvation; but Jesus is willing to tell his Father exactly what he is going through – what this is; and he is willing to pour out all these emotions to God, as it were, through this psalm.

DAVE BAST

And I think there is a very interesting... that is too weak a word... a very profound difference, though, in our experience and his. This psalm of lamentation does encourage us to take our feelings of abandonment and feelings of forsakenness to God and express them to him – to lament before him when we have suffered; but in Jesus' case, I know there has been a lot of debate over what does it mean that he quoted that verse from Psalm 22 – that opening verse? Maybe he only *felt* forsaken by God, but we believe, I think, that he actually *was* forsaken by God in some deeply mysterious way that is beyond our capacity to understand, he was speaking reality at that point; he was speaking the truth; but here is the difference: Because he actually undertook that penalty – that curse – that forsakenness – and tasted hell for us, which is really what that is, we will never be abandoned by God or forsaken by him.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

In fact, our communion liturgy has that beautiful phrase in it, because he did this for us, and cried out that cry, we can know that we will never be forsaken. So when we are praying it, it is only what we feel, it is not the reality.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes. You know, I have sometimes said we go through our mini hells, where we feel forsaken, but we are really not ultimately forsaken. It seems like the lights are out, as C. S. Lewis says, in God's house, but God is still there; but I think the very fact that, as you say, Jesus fully fulfilled this psalm gives us the courage to be this honest with God. You know, our relationship with God is founded on what Jesus Christ has done for us; and so, we don't have to play games with God; we don't have to approach God with a sense of, well, I have to say the right things to him or maybe he will walk away. Because of what Christ has gone through – because of the fulfillment of this psalm – we can bring our emotions to God and say: Lord, this is what I am experiencing.

DAVE BAST

And it is our deepest question, isn't it? I mean, we have talked earlier in this series of programs on the Psalms about the question: Why? The question that so quickly comes to our lips; and sometimes it is sort of theoretical: Why does that person have what I don't have? But when we are going through our mini hell, the question, why, is the deepest expression of anguish that we see in this psalm: My God, my God, *why*? And we are encouraged to just pour that out to him. Maybe the most significant word in that whole phrase is the *my*: *My God, my God*...

BOB HEERSPINK

There is still that...

DAVE BAST

There is still, right...

BOB HEERSPINK

That direction... the sufferer is still...

DAVE BAST

There is still that relationship, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Looking to God. It is not my Father right now. There is this sense of perhaps tension because of what is going on, but it is still my God.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you just reminded me of something very significant. This is the only time in the Gospels when Jesus addresses God as God and not as Father; so, yes, there is that; but it is *my*; there is still the relationship.

BOB HEERSPINK

And there is more to come, because so often we stop looking at a psalm like this in terms of lament, just at the point where the psalmist really turns a corner to a whole different perspective, and we have to take another look at this psalm if we really want to see the full understanding of what it means to lament before our God.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into Psalm 22 as a psalm that expresses lament to God.

DAVE BAST

Right, Bob; and it is the expression of faith; it is a person who cries out: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? This is not the screams of an agnostic or a God hater or somebody who has lost their faith and is just bagging the whole deal.

BOB HEERSPINK

The thing that we as Christians have to understand is that when we reach that point of just getting honest with God and telling God exactly how we feel, that is not an expression of unbelief.

DAVE BAST

Right. One of the most beautiful things I have read that does that very thing is a little book by Nick Wolterstorff. He is a very significant Christian philosopher who taught at Calvin College, and then later at Yale, and his son Eric was killed in a mountain climbing accident in his mid-20s, and several years later Nick wrote a book called *Lament for a Son*, and it was just this profound expression of genuine grief and anguish, but also of real faith in a loving God – a God who does hear when we cry out: Why? Why?

BOB HEERSPINK

And so many people read that book because I think it connected with their own laments. It helped other people express the lament that they felt in their own losses.

DAVE BAST

But as we turn again to Psalm 22, we find that it does take a change of direction. This wonderful idea that the Psalms can not only help us to pray, they can teach us what we ought to say when we pray. We may not even feel what the psalm expresses until we use the words, and then we will find that it is leading us along a path that goes through lamentation – it does not skip it – it starts there, but it does not end there – it does not stop there either.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, let's read some of those verses, because now we begin to make this turn that really moves to celebration. You know, we talk about, okay, what emotions do we express in worship? Well, celebration is part of it, but sometimes through the door of lamentation. The psalmist says:

¹⁹But you, Lord, do not be far from me. You are my strength come quickly to help me. ²⁰Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs. ²¹Rescue me from the mouth of the lions; save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

DAVE BAST

And then here is the shift to praise and worship: ²²I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you. ²³You who fear the Lord, praise him. All you descendants of Jacob honor him; revere him; ²⁴for he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one. He has not hidden his face from him, but has listened to his cry for help.

BOB HEERSPINK

And then the psalm pushes out into an invitation for all people – the congregation – the community – to celebrate the answers to prayer that God gives:

²⁵From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly. Before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows. ²⁶The poor will eat and be satisfied. Those who seek the Lord will praise him. May your hearts live forever.

DAVE BAST

²⁷All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations will bow down before him. ³¹They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it. Certainly that has come true, too, in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, whose suffering brought us salvation, and whose message of hope and life and faith is now shared with all the nations throughout the world. So, this fantastic movement of honesty in the face of loss, genuine lamentation, but ultimately it ends in praise. It makes me think of that great line from – what is it, Psalm 30, I think: Weeping may endure for a night, but joy will come in the morning.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and again, we see in this passage, like we have seen in other passages, the way in which the community is invited into the celebration. You know, when the Lord answers our prayers – when he comes through – as the psalmist expects him to come through – we have a responsibility then to go to others and say: Celebrate with me. This is what God has done. You know, we are not big in some of our traditions about testimony time and sharing personal stories and the like; but the psalmist says there is a place for that. There is a place for talking to others about how God has come through when you were in the pit; he has lifted you up.

DAVE BAST

Yes, okay; but now I want to be kind of practical here, and throw this to you and see what your reaction is. Do you think... we are talking about corporate worship here... do you think that there should be services that we plan that are lamentation services; and then other services that are praise resulting from it? Should we ever do that, or should we try to make this transition in the same service?

BOB HEERSPINK

I think you always in worship need to come down to the grace of God as it triumphs and as God will come through for you in terms of answered prayer. So I don't think we have a lament service and we say: Here we are in the pits, but come back next week and things will look better; but to understand this flow of worship, the flow of this psalm, I think, is something that would really enhance many of our worship experiences.

DAVE BAST

Well, and maybe another take-away from Psalm 22 is that when you are going through it as an individual, don't drop out of worship. Keep coming. You may grieve through it. I remember my wife telling me how for years... her older brother was killed in a car accident... and for at least a couple of years, her mother could not get through a church service without weeping; but she kept coming, and eventually came through to share that praise with the congregation.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think it suggests that there are times in the life of a community where lament would become very important. I know after...

DAVE BAST

Take on maybe a larger role in a public service.

BOB HEERSPINK

After 9/11 our church had a service of lament. I think of some of the communities across North America that have gone through tornadoes and loss of life... how appropriate it would be for the community to gather and have a service of lament.

DAVE BAST

But you end with a note of praise and hope and trust in the faithfulness of the God who hears and saves us.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Amen. Well, thanks for joining us today on *Groundwork*; and remember that it is listeners like you sharing with us that will help keep our programs relevant and timely. So let us know what passages of scripture perhaps, or subjects you would like us to address in future *Groundwork* programs. Just visit us at groundworkonline.com.

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