

# **Suffering as The Path to Glory: The Book of Psalms Speaks Today**

**by Dr. Mark D. Futato**

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“Why do I have to suffer, Lord?” Has this cry ever risen from the depths of your soul? I’m sure it has. We have all suffered to one degree or another. But why? Sometimes we suffer because of our sin (Ps. 32:1-5; 38:1-4). Sometimes we suffer in spite of our innocence (Ps. 7:1-9; 44:9-22). But why? Whether because of sin or in spite of innocence, “Why do I have to suffer?”

Didn’t the Lord Jesus Christ come that we “might have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10)? Hasn’t Jesus paid the penalty for our sins (Rom. 3:25)? Hasn’t he redeemed us from the curse so that we might experience blessing (Gal. 3:13-14)? Why do we have to suffer in this life?

People throughout the ages have offered a number of perspectives on the answer to this basic question of life. Perhaps a fully satisfactory answer remains beyond our reach as human beings. While not providing an exhaustive answer, the Book of Psalms gives us a piece of the answer to support us in weathering the storms of suffering in this life.

## **Suffering to Glory in the Book of Psalms**

The title “Book of Psalms” is based on the Greek and Latin titles for the book, not on the Hebrew title. The Hebrew title is best translated “Book of Praises.” This is somewhat odd, given that more psalms lament our sufferings than celebrate our successes! Were we to name the book after the most frequent type of psalm, we would no doubt call it “The Book of Lamentations.” But the ancient Hebrews had a profound insight when they chose to call it “The Book of Praises.”

Throughout the history of interpreting the Psalms it has gone without saying that the order of the psalms is not haphazard. The only exception to this has been the last hundred years or so, during which time the idea has reigned supreme that the Psalter is a random anthology of a variety of types or categories of religious poetry. Just as pieces of music can be put into categories (classical, jazz, blues, pop, rock, rap, etc.), so can pieces of literature. A story that starts “Once upon a time” is not a historical novel but is a fairy tale. A psalm is a different type of literature than a genealogy. The individual psalms can be put into categories. Hymns, laments, and songs of thanksgiving are three common

types of psalms. Studying one psalm in relation to other psalms from the same category can be quite helpful. For example, studying Psalms 15 and 24 together will help you understand both in a deeper way, since they are both entrance liturgies, i.e., psalms that were used by worshipers who wished to enter the presence of God at the sanctuary.

In the last twenty years, however, it has become increasingly evident once again that the Psalter is not a random anthology. The individual psalms have been arranged in a purposeful order so that the book as a whole communicates a message that is greater than the sum of the parts that make it up. This is an exciting and rewarding avenue of research in my own study of the Book of Psalms. Though it is beyond the scope of this article to trace out in detail the purposeful arrangement of the Psalms, I want to draw to your attention to one element in the overall shape of the Psalter, one element that provides an insight into why the ancient Hebrews called the book “The Book of Praises.” Grasping this insight helps us grasp a bit more firmly why we suffer in this life.

While it is true that there are more laments than any other type of psalm in the Psalter, it is not true that the laments are spread evenly throughout the book. The truth is that the laments are clearly piled up in the front of the book:

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

Answer me when I call to you,  
 O my righteous God.  
 Give me relief from my distress;  
 be merciful to me and hear my prayer. (4:1)

Give ear to my words, O LORD,  
 consider my sighing. (5:1)

Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint;  
 LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony.  
 My soul is in anguish.  
 How long, O LORD, how long? (6:2-3)

LORD my God, I take refuge in you;  
 save and deliver me from all who pursue me,  
 or they will tear me like a lion  
 and rip me to pieces with no one to rescue me. (7:1-2)

Why, O LORD, do you stand far off?  
 Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (10:1)

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?  
 How long will you hide your face from me?  
 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
 and every day have sorrow in my heart?  
 How long will my enemy triumph over me? (13:1-2)

Examples could be multiplied. The dominant cord at the front of the Book of Psalms is the discord of suffering.

The end of the Psalter is remarkably different. The “Book of Praises” is so called because it ends on a crescendo of praise. The crescendo begins with the words, “Praise be to the LORD, my Rock” (144:1). Psalm 145 then starts with, “I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever,” and ends with, “My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.” This call is answered in the final five psalms, all of which start and stop with, “Praise the LORD.” In addition we hear lines like the following:

Praise the LORD, O my soul.  
 I will praise the LORD all my life;  
 I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. (146:1-2)

How good it is to sing praises to our God,  
 how pleasant and fitting to praise him! (147:1)

Praise the LORD from the heavens,  
 praise him in the heights above.  
 Praise the Lord from the earth,  
 you great sea creatures and all ocean depths. (148:1, 7)

Sing to the LORD a new song,  
 his praise in the assemble of the saints. (149:1)

The crescendo reaches its peak in the very last psalm, every line of which contains two commands to “praise,” except the final line which says, “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.”

In the macrostructure of the Book of Psalms there is a clear movement from lamentation to praise, hence the title, “Book of Praises.” We can put this in other terms: in the macrostructure of the Book of Psalms there is a clear movement from suffering to

glory. The picture that is beginning to emerge on the canvas is that in some way suffering is the path to glory.

### **Suffering to Glory in the Psalms of Lament**

This pattern of suffering followed by glory is not only found in the overall structure of the Book of Psalms, it is also found in the structure of the lament psalm itself. The well known Psalm 22 is exemplary in this regard. The psalm begins with the agonizing cry of the soul:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
 Why are you so far from saving me,  
 so far from the words of my groaning?  
 O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  
 by night, and am not silent.

The next eighteen verses describe the depths of suffering experienced by the psalmist: “I am worm and not a man... All who seek me mock me... I am poured out like water... My strength is dried up like a potsherd... I can count all my bones... They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.”

Then there occurs a most extraordinary shift in mood at verse 22: “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you. You who fear the LORD, praise him!” In the latter verses we also hear: “From you comes my praise in the great assembly” and “they who seek the LORD will praise him.”

To what can we attribute this extraordinary shift from lamentation to praise, from suffering to glory? The answer is, “We don’t know for sure.” Perhaps the very articulating of the agony had a cathartic effect on the psalmist. Perhaps a priest spoke a word that promised relief and enabled faith to rise above circumstances (see 1 Sam. 1:17 in the context of Hannah’s previous lament). Perhaps there is a gap in time and experience between the lamentation and the praise, a gap during which the psalmist experienced deliverance from distress. We simply do not know for sure. What we do know is that lamentation led to praise, suffering led to glory.

### **Suffering to Glory in the Life of Christ**

Psalm 22 not only shows us the pattern of suffering as the path to glory, but it also draws us deeper into the mystery of this path as it points us to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ who said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). The suffering of Psalm 22:1-21 is ultimately the suffering of Christ. He is the singer of the

lament. It is Jesus Christ who also said, “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises” (Heb. 2:12). The glory of Psalm 22:22-31 is also ultimately the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The path to glory that Jesus walked was the path of suffering. Just before the quotation of Psalm 22:22 in Hebrews 2:12, the author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is now “*crowned with glory and honor because he suffered*” (Heb. 2:9). The author of Hebrews understood the movement of Jesus’ life to be that of suffering to glory. But why was this Jesus’ path? The path of suffering to glory was Jesus’ path because it was the “fitting” way for God to bring us to glory (Heb. 2:10).

You see, the world to come has not been subjected to angels but to humans (Heb. 2:5; see 1 Cor. 6:3). The proof of this, says the author of Hebrews, is found in Psalm 8:4-6:

What is man that you are mindful of him,  
the son of man that you care for him?  
You made him a little lower than the angels;  
you crowned him with glory and honor  
and put everything under his feet.

When created, we were not crowned with suffering but with glory. But when tempted in Adam, we sinned and suffered sin’s misery that results in death (Heb 2:15). Our original sin and our actual sins bring suffering in their wake. Though created for glory, we now live in a world of temptation, sin, and suffering.

But God’s purpose would not be thwarted. He willed to bring us to glory, and the way that was “fitting” for him to bring us to glory was by making our Savior perfect “through suffering.” In order to bring us to glory it was necessary for Jesus to share in our humanity (Heb. 2:14,17). He had to be like us in every way, except sin (Heb. 4:15), to atone for our sins (Heb. 2:17). Moreover, “*he learned obedience from what he suffered*” as one aspect of his work as our Savior. Given that our destiny is glory but our lot in this life is suffering because of sin, it was “fitting” for Jesus to enter into our suffering and learn obedience through his suffering in order to bring us into his glory.

He suffered and entered into glory as our substitute. Jesus is the new humanity to whom the world to come has been subjected, and it has been subjected to us as we are united to him. His suffering to atone for our sins means that we do not have to suffer for this reason. Suffering is our path to glory but it is not an atoning path. Jesus alone walked that path.

## Suffering to Glory in Our Lives

Jesus also suffered and entered into glory as our example. Since it was fitting that his path to glory be that of suffering, it is now fitting that our path to glory also be one of suffering. Paul says, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, *if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*” Peter likewise says, “But rejoice that *you participate in the sufferings of Christ*, so that you may be overjoyed when *his glory* is revealed.” The suffering in view is no doubt the all-encompassing groaning that is part of living in a creation that has been “subjected to frustration” (Rom. 8:20). Yet, Peter says that there is nothing praiseworthy about the suffering that we bring on ourselves by violating God’s will (1 Pet. 4:15). Such suffering is not “according to God’s will” but contrary to it (1 Pet. 4:19). The suffering in which we rejoice and are blessed is suffering “because of the name of Christ” or suffering “as a Christian” (1 Pet. 4:14,16). It is suffering for “doing good [rather] than for doing evil” (1 Pet. 3:17).

These New Testament authors understood the theology of the Book of Psalms. They understood that for us as for the Lord Jesus Christ suffering is the fitting path to glory. So, in a sense, suffering is not to be viewed as “bad” but as a path. It is a painful path, to be sure, but the pain of our path cannot compare with the glory of our destiny (2 Cor. 4:17).

Sometimes we suffer because of our own sin. The very first lament psalm (Ps. 3) provides an example of this. In Psalm 3 David is suffering opposition as a result of Absalom’s rebellion (see the title to the psalm). Absalom’s rebellion can be traced back to his being exiled by his father for the murder of Amnon (2 Sam. 13:23-39). The murder of Amnon can be traced back to Amnon’s rape of Absalom’s sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1-21). The rape of Tamar and the murder of Amnon are the fruit of David’s adultery with Bathsheba and his conspiracy to have Uriah murdered (2 Sam. 11). In Psalm 3 David was reaping what he had sown.

Such suffering, while not praiseworthy, is clearly the path to glory. When we suffer for our sin, God intends by such suffering to teach us obedience. The psalmist said:

Before I was afflicted I went astray,  
but now I obey your word. (119:67)

It was good for me to be afflicted  
so that I might learn your decrees. (119:71)

In such suffering we see the goodness, righteousness, and faithfulness of our God (Ps. 119:68,75) who is at work to bring us into conformity with his glorious image that is seen in the person of his Son (Rom. 8:28-29).

At other times we suffer in spite of our innocence. Psalm 44 provides a poignant illustration of this. In the recent past the king and people had, like their ancestors, not trusted in themselves for their military victories but had trusted in the Lord and had given him the glory (44:1-8) as they won battle after battle. But in the present they were experiencing defeat and disgrace on every side (44:9-16). Defeat and disgrace would have been understandable had there been rebellion against the Lord in one form or another. But the fact was that the defeat and disgrace had come in spite of covenant loyalty to the Lord (44:17-26). Because of their loyalty to God they were facing death all day long (44:22). Paul quotes Psalm 44:22 in Romans 8:36 in the middle of a list of all kinds of suffering that we face in this life as Christians. We too can experience the reality of Psalm 44 — suffering in spite of innocence. We too suffer for God’s sake, knowing that we are right with him even as we stand for him.

The eye of reason always cannot penetrate the darkness of suffering in this life. The “Why?” of Psalm 22 is forced from our lips at such times. Through the psalms God grants us permission as his children to scream out our most agonizing questions in his presence. “Why, O LORD?” “How long, O LORD?” “O LORD, where is your former great love?” Such language is not off limits in prayer, but is welcomed by a Father who has somewhere in his mysterious love a place for suffering. The psalms help us get through those dark valleys of perplexity where God cannot be seen and his ways cannot be understood.

While the eye of reason cannot always penetrate the darkness of suffering in this life, the eye of faith can penetrate the darkness of the cross in the light of the resurrection. Faith enables us to be certain of what we cannot see (Heb. 11:1). As the eye of faith peers up into heaven, it gazes upon him who is now crowned with glory because he suffered. The eye of faith gazes upon him who “suffered for [us], leaving [us] an example, that [we] should follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21). The eye of faith gazes upon him who says, “If any one would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24).

Inexplicable suffering has a place in the Book of Psalms and that place is prior to the glorious doxology at the end of the book. In other words, the structure of the Book of Psalms teaches us that the inexplicable suffering we endure in this life is also in some mysterious way part of the path to glory. In the perplexity of doubt and fear and anger and confusion, God meets us. And in this meeting we are changed. His glory transforms us into a greater likeness to his glory (2 Cor. 3:18). In the dark hour of the soul the Holy Spirit comes to us and testifies to us that we belong to God (Rom. 8:16). By the Holy Spirit in a special way the Father pours out his love into our hearts when we suffer, enabling us to rejoice in the work he is doing in us (Rom. 5:3-5). The Holy Spirit comforts us in our suffering with a comfort that we can then extend to others who suffer in a like manner (2 Cor. 1:3-11).

As surely as the Book of Psalms moves from lamentation to praise, from suffering to glory, so most assuredly will we, because Jesus has gone before us as our substitute and as our example. We may not receive a complete answer when we are forced to cry out, "Why do I have to suffer, Lord?" But this we know: suffering is the path to glory. In this truth we experience consolation and strength and freedom, for in this truth we experience the transforming presence of the Father and the Son through the Spirit whom they sent to be with us every step of the way on our path to glory.