

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 22

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Psalms 22 is a sustained movement from desolation to declaration — one of the most theologically dense and structurally coherent psalms in the entire Psalter. It opens with the raw cry of one who feels utterly abandoned by God (vv. 1–2), escalates through a pattern of lament and historical recollection (vv. 3–11), descends into visceral physical suffering described in terms that exceed ordinary human illness or distress (vv. 12–18), and then pivots decisively at verse 19 with a cry for deliverance. From verse 22 onward, the psalm explodes into praise — praise that begins with a single sufferer’s vow to declare God’s name and expands, verse by verse, to encompass the congregation of Israel, the nations, future generations, and all of creation. The psalm does not resolve the suffering by explaining it; it resolves it by the act of praise that it prophesies will follow divine rescue.

The psalm has two primary voices: the voice of the sufferer (vv. 1–21) and the voice of the worshipping community that the sufferer himself calls into existence through his rescue (vv. 22–31). The pivot at verse 22 — “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” — is the hinge of the whole. The sufferer becomes the worship leader; the abandoned one becomes the herald of God’s faithful character to the nations.

This Text — Intent

God’s intent through this psalm is layered and specific. First, He is giving His people language for suffering — permission to cry out in apparent abandonment while remaining in address to God rather than departing from Him. The psalm is not a crisis of faith that resolves into faith; it is faith expressing itself through extremity. Second, God is demonstrating that the pattern of righteous suffering followed by vindication and praise is not an accident of history but the very shape of His covenant faithfulness — a shape that finds its perfect form in the suffering, death, and resurrection of His Son. Third, He is calling every reader who has ever prayed “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” to understand that this cry is not the end of the story — not for David, not for Christ, and not for them.

Subject Sentence: The righteous sufferer cries out in abandonment and is vindicated to lead universal praise.

Primary Claim: God is assuring His people that the experience of felt abandonment does not indicate actual abandonment — that He has not despised or scorned the afflicted one's cry, and that through suffering His purposes of praise and proclamation reach to the ends of the earth. The pattern this psalm establishes finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ, making it not only a window into David's anguish but the prophecy by which Jesus himself interpreted His own death and the salvation that flows from it.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Messianic Question — Direct Prophecy, Typology, or Both?

The most significant interpretive divergence on Psalm 22 concerns its relationship to Christ. Three positions exist within orthodox Christianity:

The *direct messianic prophecy* reading holds that David was writing primarily about a future person — the Messiah — rather than about his own experience. This reading is attractive because several details of the psalm (the piercing of hands and feet in v. 16, the division of garments in v. 18, the specific vocabulary of abandonment quoted by Jesus in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34) map onto the crucifixion with a precision that surpasses typological resonance. Some within this tradition argue David was writing beyond his own experience under the Spirit's direct inspiration.

The *typological* reading holds that David was writing about his own genuine experience — real suffering, real felt abandonment, real rescue — and that the Holy Spirit superintended this writing in such a way that David's experience became the pattern that Christ would perfectly fulfill. The details that exceed David's likely literal experience (the encirclement by bulls and dogs, the explicit joint dislocation, the casting of lots) are interpreted as either hyperbolic intensification or as the Spirit pressing David's language into prophetic territory without David necessarily understanding the full referent.

The *two-horizon* reading, represented by Reformed biblical theology (following Clowney, Vos, and Goldsworthy), holds that both are true simultaneously and that the tension is not a problem to be solved. David was writing about his own situation; the psalm genuinely addressed his condition; and yet the Spirit's work in and through David produced a text whose complete referent is the Son of David. On this reading, Psalm 22 is not *only* about David, nor is it *only* about Christ — it is a text with a single authorial meaning (the Holy Spirit's) that encompasses both the type and its perfect fulfillment.

The Reformed verdict: The two-horizon reading best accounts for the whole text and its New Testament usage. Jesus does not quote Psalm 22:1 as a proof-text — He prays it. He is not citing a prediction; He is living into the psalm as the one whose experience it was always ultimately describing. Matthew and John both invoke the psalm at the crucifixion not as prediction being checked off but as pattern being filled up to overflowing. Hebrews 2:12 quotes Psalm 22:22 and places it in the mouth of Christ in His post-resurrection

proclamation to His brothers — sealing the reading that the worshipping herald of verse 22 is Christ leading the church in praise. The Reformed reading acknowledges and retains the Davidic referent while insisting that the psalm’s full weight and force are not explicable without the Christ who perfectly fulfilled it.

The “Why Have You Forsaken Me?” Question — Real or Rhetorical?

A secondary interpretive question concerns whether Jesus on the cross experienced actual God-forsakenness or was citing the psalm as a pattern that ended in vindication, implying from the outset that rescue was coming. Some interpreters, wanting to guard divine impassibility or the eternal unity of the Trinity, argue that Jesus was using the psalm rhetorically — signaling the whole psalm’s trajectory, not expressing genuine dereliction.

This reading should be **refuted**. It evacuates the substitutionary atonement of its content. If Christ did not bear the actual curse — the actual judicial wrath that constitutes separation from God — then there is no atonement. Paul’s “He became sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21) and “cursed for us” (Galatians 3:13) require a real God-forsakenness, not a pedagogical citation. The psalm’s opening cry is not rhetorical distance from abandonment — it is its confession. That it ends in praise does not mean the abandonment was not real; it means the abandonment was not permanent.

The Application to Believers — Identification or Imitation?

Wesleyan/Arminian and some Baptist traditions have sometimes applied Psalm 22 by encouraging believers to express their sufferings to God in similar raw honesty — a valid point — but occasionally slide toward presenting the psalm as primarily a model for “honest prayer in suffering,” making it principally about spiritual practice rather than Christological pattern. This application should be **qualified**: while the psalm does give believers language for suffering (and this is real and important), the primary applicational force runs through Christ, not around Him. The believer’s confidence in bringing honest lament to God rests on the fact that the Son has been through this and emerged from it as the worship leader of all nations — not simply on the fact that David modeled raw honesty. The Christological grounding is what gives the lament form its ultimate weight.

Key Canonical Support

- **Matthew 27:35–46** — The crucifixion narrative invokes Psalm 22 explicitly (the garments in v. 35, the mockers’ words in vv. 43–44, and Jesus’ cry in v. 46), establishing the psalm as the interpretive lens through which the cross is to be read.
- **Hebrews 2:10–12** — Quotes Psalm 22:22 (“I will declare your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you”) and places it in the mouth of the risen Christ, identifying Him as the one who leads the redeemed community in worship — the exact role the sufferer assumes at the psalm’s pivot.

- **Isaiah 52:13–53:12** — The Servant Song that most closely parallels Psalm 22’s pattern of humiliation, abandonment, and ultimate vindication, grounding the psalm’s movement in the broader prophetic testimony to the suffering and exaltation of God’s righteous Servant.
- **Philippians 2:5–11** — The Christ hymn articulates the same movement as Psalm 22 in doctrinal terms: extreme humiliation (including death on a cross), followed by exaltation to the name above every name, so that every tongue confesses — matching the psalm’s expansion from individual sufferer to universal praise (vv. 27–31).
- **Romans 8:31–39** — Paul’s climactic doxology in Romans 8 answers the fear that suffering signals divine abandonment with a direct rebuttal: nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. This is the doctrinal weight Psalm 22 carries in narrative-poetic form — that the one who was not spared is the guarantee that we will not be abandoned.

Aim: To demonstrate from Psalm 22 that the experience of felt abandonment in suffering is not evidence of God’s absence but the very ground on which His faithfulness is most fully revealed — in Christ, and therefore for all who are in Christ.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	The opening cry: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Distance and silence experienced despite continuous calling — day and night	The psalm opens in medias res — no preamble, no orientation. The address to “my God” is itself an act of faith; abandonment has not produced departure from God but cry toward Him
3–5	Theological anchoring: God is holy and enthroned on Israel’s praises; the fathers trusted and were delivered	The sufferer reasons from God’s character and historical faithfulness — establishing that the present silence is anomalous, not typical
6–8	The depth of abasement: “I am a worm and not a man” — scorned, despised, mocked; the mockers use	The mockery echoes precisely in Matthew 27:43. The taunters unwittingly confirm the sufferer’s

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	his own faith as the instrument of taunt: “He trusts in the LORD — let the LORD rescue him”	identity as one whose defining characteristic is trust in God
9–11	Second anchoring: God has been his God since birth — from the womb He has been trusted, and there was no other helper	The sufferer escalates the appeal by tracing the relationship to its beginning. If God has been his God since birth, the abandonment makes no covenant sense
12–13	First wave of imagery: surrounded by “strong bulls of Bashan” on every side; ravening and roaring lion	The enemies are depicted with animal imagery suggesting overwhelming, predatory power — not political opponents but existential threat
14–15	Physical dissolution: bones out of joint, heart like melted wax, strength dried up like a potsherd, tongue cleaved to jaws; “you lay me in the dust of death”	This language surpasses ordinary illness or distress. The physical detail has led many interpreters to read a prophetic specificity pointing beyond David’s own experience
16	“Dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet”	One of the most debated verses in the psalm. The Hebrew <i>ka’ari</i> (like a lion) versus <i>ka’aru</i> (they have pierced) — the Masoretic Text and LXX diverge here. The context, the Dead Sea Scrolls variant, and the New Testament usage support “pierced”
17–18	The sufferer can count all his bones; the enemies stare and gloat; they divide his garments and cast lots for his clothing	John 19:23–24 quotes verse 18 explicitly as fulfilled at the crucifixion
19–21	The pivot cry: “But you, O LORD, do not be far off!” —	The tone shifts. The description gives way to

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	appeal for deliverance from the sword, from the dog, from the lion, from the horns of the wild oxen	petition. The prayer is answered — “you have rescued me” (v. 21b, implied or stated depending on textual tradition)
22	Vow to declare God’s name to “my brothers” — to praise in the midst of the congregation	This is the structural hinge. The sufferer has been rescued and now becomes herald. Hebrews 2:12 places this on the lips of the risen Christ
23–24	Call to the congregation to praise: “For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one or hidden his face from him; but has listened to his cry for help”	The theological center of the psalm’s resolution: the cry was heard; the face was not ultimately hidden; the silence was not rejection
25–26	The vow fulfilled: praise in the great congregation; the poor will eat and be satisfied; those who seek the LORD will praise Him — “May your hearts live forever!”	The praise community expands from the sufferer to the congregation to the poor/afflicted who share in the deliverance
27–28	Further expansion: all the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD; all families of the nations will bow before Him; for dominion belongs to the LORD	The scope becomes global — from one sufferer to all nations. The missionary horizon of the Abrahamic covenant surfaces here
29	Even the prosperous and those who go down to the dust will bow — even those who cannot keep their soul alive	Universal submission across social and mortal categories
30–31	Future generations will serve Him; “they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that	The proclamation extends across time — to people not yet born. The final phrase “that he has done it” (or “it is

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	he has done it”	finished”) carries extraordinary weight in light of John 19:30

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–2	The Cry of Abandonment — Distance and Silence
2	3–5	First Anchoring — God’s Holiness and Historical Faithfulness
3	6–8	The Depth of Abasement — Mockery and Scorn
4	9–11	Second Anchoring — God’s Care Since Birth
5	12–18	The Suffering Described — Physical Dissolution and Encirclement
6	19–21	The Pivot — The Cry for Deliverance and Its Answer
7	22–26	The Vow — Declaration, Praise, and Congregational Expansion
8	27–31	The Horizon — Universal and Multigenerational Praise

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The righteous sufferer cries out in abandonment and is vindicated to lead universal praise.

Primary Claim: God is assuring His people that the experience of felt abandonment does not indicate actual abandonment — that He has not despised or scorned the afflicted one’s cry, and that through suffering His purposes of praise and proclamation reach to the ends of the earth. The pattern this psalm establishes finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ, making it not only a window into David’s anguish but the prophecy by which Jesus himself interpreted His own death and the salvation that flows from it.

Applications (Five)

1. When God is silent, He is not absent — bring your “why” to Him rather than away from Him. (*Mind/Belief*) The psalm’s first word is not despair but address: “My God.” The sufferer is confused, anguished, and feels forsaken — and he says so directly to God. This is not a psalm of unbelief; it is a psalm of faith under extreme pressure taking the only appropriate form available: honest, raw, continued speech toward the God who seems to have gone quiet. When you face the silence of God in suffering — when the prayers seem to return unopened, when the darkness does not lift, when the expected rescue does not come — the temptation is to stop praying. Psalm 22 refuses this. It models the discipline of remaining in address to God even when no answer comes, because the God who is addressed is still “my God,” and the covenant has not been voided by His silence. Bring the “why” to Him. Do not turn the silence into a verdict.

2. Root your faith in what God has done, not only in what you are currently experiencing. (*Mind/Belief*) Three times in the lament section (vv. 3–5, 9–11) the psalmist interrupts his own cry of despair to rehearse what he knows to be true: God is holy; the fathers trusted and were not put to shame; God has been his God since birth. These are not emotional recoveries — they are deliberate theological acts, the practice of grounding one’s perception of the present in the established record of God’s character and faithfulness. When suffering makes the present feel like the only reality, rehearsing the record of God’s past faithfulness is not denial — it is the most accurate thing a suffering believer can do. The fathers were not put to shame. You were not abandoned from the womb. These truths are not overridden by your current experience; they are the frame that interprets it.

3. Let the resurrection of Christ be the ground of your confidence that felt abandonment is not final abandonment. (*Affections/Worship*) The psalm’s pivot is not the sufferer’s resolve but divine rescue — “you have rescued me” (v. 21). The movement from anguish to praise is not powered by the sufferer pulling himself together; it is powered by God acting. For the Christian, this pivot has a face: the one who cried “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” from the cross is the same one who was raised on the third day and who now leads the redeemed congregation in praise (Hebrews 2:12). The resurrection is not merely a historical fact to be believed; it is the living demonstration that the worst possible abandonment — actual, judicial God-forsakenness in the place of sinners — was not the last word. When you feel abandoned, you are not in territory that Christ has not navigated. He went further into abandonment than you will ever go, and He came back as the worship leader of all nations. Let this ignite worship, not just relief.

4. Recognize that your suffering, when brought to God, is never private — it has a congregational and even global witness. (*Affections/Worship*) The psalm does not end with a private resolution between one sufferer and his God. It explodes outward: to the brothers, to the congregation, to the poor, to the nations, to future generations, to people not yet born. The sufferer’s rescue becomes the substance of a proclamation that reaches the ends of the earth. This is not the psalmist’s ambition — it is the consequence of God’s

faithfulness. When you bring your suffering honestly to God and receive His faithfulness in it, that story — your testimony of “he has not despised the affliction of the afflicted one” — is not yours alone. It belongs to the congregation, to the nations, to those who will come after you. Do not privatize what God intends to make a public declaration of His faithfulness.

5. Stop living as though your suffering disqualifies you from God’s covenant care — receive the psalm’s verdict instead. (*Will/Behavior*) Verse 24 is the psalm’s doctrinal center: “He has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one or hidden his face from him; but has listened to his cry for help.” This verdict is spoken over the one who spent twenty-one verses convinced of the opposite. The lived experience was abandonment; the truth was faithful presence. Many believers carry their suffering as evidence that something has gone wrong with their standing before God — that the pain means something is broken in the relationship, that they have been categorized differently. Psalm 22 refuses this conclusion with force. The afflicted one is not despised. The cry is heard. Stop treating your suffering as God’s rejection slip. Receive the covenant verdict instead: He has listened.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 22 teaches that God’s faithfulness is not suspended by suffering — not even by suffering so extreme that it feels like total divine abandonment. The passage reveals that God is the God who is enthroned on the praises of Israel (v. 3) even when the one suffering cannot perceive His presence; who hears the cry of the afflicted even when He appears to have hidden His face (v. 24); and whose purposes through the suffering of His righteous servant extend to the nations and to generations yet unborn (vv. 27–31). The psalm also teaches that the pattern of righteous suffering followed by vindication and universal praise is not incidental to God’s redemptive purposes — it is the shape of them. This is a God who accomplishes His greatest acts of salvation through the deepest acts of apparent abandonment, which means His silence is never evidence of His absence, and the cross is the permanent proof.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 22 is one of the Psalter’s most concentrated displays of substitutionary atonement in prophetic-poetic form. The Reformed tradition’s insistence that Christ bore actual judicial wrath — real God-forsakenness — finds its fullest Old Testament voice here. This is not a psalm about suffering in general; it is, ultimately, the psalm in which the second person of the Trinity entered the outer darkness of covenant curse on behalf of His people and emerged as the firstborn of a redeemed humanity leading universal praise. The Reformed emphasis on the sufficiency and finality of Christ’s atoning work is confirmed precisely here: “he has done it” (v. 31) — the same

note struck in John 19:30 — signals that the work accomplished in the psalm's suffering is complete, finished, and of cosmic and eternal scope. For the believer, this means assurance does not rest on the quality of one's experience of God but on the objective accomplishment of the one who bore abandonment in our place and emerged as our worship leader — the very logic of Romans 8 and the very structure of Psalm 22.

Main Takeaway

God is telling you through this psalm that felt abandonment is not actual abandonment — and He is proving it by pointing you to the one who endured the only real abandonment there has ever been, bore it to the end, and came back as the leader of your worship. Your suffering has not moved you outside His hearing. The cry is heard. He has not despised the affliction of the afflicted. “He has done it” — and that verdict covers you.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the psalm as only a messianic proof-text, bypassing David's genuine experience.** The temptation — especially for Reformed preachers who rightly want to get to Christ — is to move through the lament sections quickly on the way to the Christological fulfillment. This is a mistake. The psalm's power in part lies precisely in the fact that the suffering is real before it is prophetic. David was genuinely crying out. If you skip past the human anguish to the doctrinal conclusion, you deprive your congregation of the permission the psalm extends to bring real suffering to God in real terms. Let the lament breathe before you show where it leads.
- **Treating the psalm as only about human experience, bypassing its Christological fulfillment.** The opposite error is equally damaging: preaching Psalm 22 as primarily a model for honest lament — “be like the psalmist, bring your raw feelings to God” — without establishing that the psalm's ultimate referent is Christ. This turns the psalm into a spiritual technique rather than a prophecy-and-fulfillment text. The reason the believer can bring honest lament to God is not that David modeled it but that Christ has borne what the psalm describes. Ground the application in the Christological fulfillment, not only in Davidic example.
- **Mishandling verse 16 (“they have pierced my hands and feet”) as isolated proof.** This verse has been used as a stand-alone messianic prediction in popular apologetics, sometimes in ways that short-circuit the psalm's larger movement. The verse is significant, but making it the primary exhibit of the psalm's messianic character — as though the rest of the psalm were context and this were the point — misreads how the psalm's messianic quality works. The whole psalm is the prophecy; verse 16 is one detail within a comprehensive pattern. Preach the pattern, not the isolated proof-text.

- **Leaving the second half of the psalm (vv. 22–31) underdeveloped.** Many expositions of Psalm 22 invest heavily in the lament (vv. 1–21) and treat the praise section as a brief resolution. This misses the structural reality: the praise section (vv. 22–31) is the destination the entire psalm is moving toward, and its expansion — from one voice to the congregation to the nations to future generations to “a people not yet born” — is the full scope of God’s purpose through the suffering. Do not let the praise section become a closing doxology. It is the claim the psalm has been building toward from verse 1.
- **Flattening “he has done it” (v. 31) without connecting it to John 19:30.** The final phrase of the psalm — *ki asah*, “that he has done it” or “for he has acted” — is one of the most remarkable concluding statements in the Psalter, and its resonance with “It is finished” (*tetelestai*) in John 19:30 is not accidental. Preachers who reach the end of the psalm without noting this connection miss the moment the psalm and the Gospel of John converge in a single declaration of completed work. This is worth pausing on, not moving past.
- **Using the psalm to endorse a “name it and claim it” or suffering-always-resolves framework.** The psalm’s movement from lament to praise should not be preached as a guarantee that every believer’s suffering will resolve in visible, this-life vindication on the same pattern. The psalm does not promise that every lament will pivot to praise before death. What it promises is that God does not ultimately despise the cry of the afflicted — a promise whose final fulfillment is eschatological, grounded in resurrection, not necessarily visible within the present order. Guard against domesticating the psalm’s promise into a prosperity framework or a “four steps to breakthrough” application.