

Psalm 22:19-28

June 22, 2025

What kind of music do you turn to when you want to relax, feel energized, express happiness, or find an outlet for your stress, grief or sadness? What kind of music gives you joy, and which can bring tears to your eyes?

In my early twenties, as I was starting my seminary years and was exposed to the reality of global social issues, I turned to the freedom songs of the civil movement for inspiration. When I came to this country in the 1980s and felt homesick, I discovered the blues. As I made new friends and life was smiling on me, I resonated with jazz. Classical music has been the foundation for my spiritual growth all along.

Music has an extraordinary ability to connect with our emotions, shaping and enhancing our moods in ways words often cannot. It transcends language and culture, offering melodies and rhythms that resonate deeply with our experiences and feelings. Whether we're seeking solace during tough times, celebrating joyous moments, or simply trying to unwind, there's a genre or song for every mood.

The psalms, a collection of 150 poetic compositions found in the Bible, are some of the earliest examples of humanity's attempts to articulate its deepest emotions and spiritual longings through music and verse. Originating in ancient Israel, these texts were intended as songs of worship, lament, thanksgiving, and praise. Each psalm captures the spectrum of human emotion from despair and grief to ecstatic joy and reverence. They allow honest reflection and the expression of our deepest feelings, from praise and exultation to anger, disillusionment and despair. They express longing for healing, justice and retribution. They also elaborate on feelings of loneliness, loss, melancholy and homesickness. Psalms glorify God and reflect on God's presence and consistent benevolence. They are timeless, resonating with people across generations as they seek comfort, inspiration, and connection in their spiritual and emotional journeys.

Psalms lend words to individual people just as songs do. They also create space for collective liturgical worship: they channel the longing and the gratitude, the joy and the sadness of all people, and individuals offer with one voice their deepest confession. The whole congregation is, thus, carried as one body through the motions of the heart and can present its spiritual sacrifice to God. Dr. Barbara A. Holmes explains how the community can be of support in bringing the sorrowful and troubled ones into the joy of God:

[D]on't forget the power of community to create spaces of joy when you cannot engender the joy yourself. That joy comes during worship, during fellowship, and even during crisis. Civil rights workers found their joy in music as they came together. I've always said, the greatest antidote to depression and oppression is joy. There's joy coming together of one accord. In the upper room, preparing to

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grieve the loss of the Savior on Calvary, suddenly there are tongues of fire and joy with the impartation of the Holy Spirit. When you feel alone, look at those who are with you in the struggle, and those who have gone before. No matter the circumstances, it was community that empowered the justice movements in this country and in others. It was a momentum of like minds focused and trusting in God that gave activists the energy to face their fears.¹

Psalm 22 starts with lament. Its words offer the community of believers a structure in which to express their suffering to God even as they remembered God's promises and salvation. The psalm moves the congregation from lament to praise in harmony.

We can hear the words of this psalm in Jesus' expression of anguish on the cross and his expectation of a logical answer from God after his lifelong loyalty and devotion: "Mt God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

An attentive reading of Psalm 22 will reveal that the evangelist Matthew used it as a basic structure to build his account of the crucifixion.²

Through the employment of this psalm, the liturgist is aware that some in the assembly may be hurting and not able to enter the celebratory mood just yet. The liturgist acknowledges there is great pain in the world and tries to draw in, using words of anguish, those who might feel easily displaced by the exuberance of the congregation and the ready excitement of celebratory reunion. It's fun to be together but not for all. Some may be dragging themselves – with a heavy heart and a great amount of turmoil – to the sanctuary out of loyal devotion to God. They may be feeling the need for companionship and spiritual food on one hand and for a time to be held, to lament, and to be free to express sighs and moans of anguish on the other. Not everybody is ready to praise God at the prescribed hour.

Through the psalm, a person in pain is given permission to feel light-years away from God and safe to question God about his abandonment. God's fidelity is somewhat challenged. And yet the inquirer is not struck silent by God: God bears the pain-motivated words of challenge with patience and understanding. One's pain is given voice in a self-righteous stance which somehow expects God to regret God's lack of steadfastness. Sorrow may at times blind us to our self-centeredness, foolishness, obtuseness, and irreverence.

Using the words of the psalmist, the congregation declares the faithfulness of the Lord in ages past and cannot comprehend what's keeping God away now. The very fact that we

¹ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/pathways-to-joy/>

² Matthew 27 especially vv. 46, 43, 35; see also John 19:24

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have trusted God all along declares that God is God: we acknowledge the relationship. Yet, God is not acting as the God known up to now, a God who is present, loving, and merciful.

When in pain, we struggle to make sense of God. We know God has been present to us from the beginning of life. The psalmist acknowledges that God, as a midwife, has brought him into the world, cradled her in Her arms, laid him on his mother's breast, protected and nurtured her all along. The question comes naturally: if Mother God has brought me into life, will She not come to my aid and protect me in proving times? Hope seems to drain from my life and my soul is losing moisture and vitality.

Life is complex and full of challenges. The psalmist paints one's health struggles and external difficulties with the vivid image of wild dogs biting at one's heels or raging bulls crushing one's bones. The pain is all too real. One may be dealing with an incurable disease, may be accused wrongly, is unjustly victimized, has lost a loved one or faces imminent danger, the cry from the depth of one's soul is loud and God cannot dismiss it.

It is said that pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional.³ Any attempt at discounting, nullifying or numbing our pain will just prolong it and cause more distress. All people hurt, but a positive attitude can give one the fortitude to plough ahead.

Recalling God's history of faithfulness and salvation and recalling the endurance of our siblings in the faith creates the shift necessary to move from misery to celebration. Salvation belongs to our God⁴ as God's presence is found all around and in us. That's what we see in the second part of the psalm: the congregation is now moved as one body to offer God glory, praise and honor. The whole earth testifies to the goodness of the Lord.

The collective exercise in recalling the moments of salvation history, the collective worship, and the collective witnessing sustains individuals in their journey of faith. When I cross the valley of the shadow of death, when despair assails me and hope has all but abandoned me, it's the faith of my community that sustains me, and trust in the faithfulness of the Lord is restored. In those moments of darkness, I am reminded that God is God and all that is required of me is to remain faithful and loyal. God will do the rest.

May we find support in one another's faith. Amen.

³ [Pain Is Inevitable, Suffering Is Optional | Psychology Today](#)

⁴ Revelation 7:19