

“Reflections on Psalm 22”

Psalm 22

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If you read through the Passion narratives in each of the four gospels, you will find that different Gospels record different words that Jesus said while he was hanging on the cross. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing,” and, to one of the men hanging with him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise,” and, near the end, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” In John’s Gospel, Jesus addresses his mother and his beloved disciple, “Woman, here is your son,” and “Here is your mother.” Later, he says, “I am thirsty,” and finally, “It is finished.” In both of those Gospels, Jesus consistently seems to express confidence and hope. But if you turn to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, we get a slightly different picture. In those Gospels, Jesus says this: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It sounds as if Jesus has completely lost all hope, that he feels utterly abandoned by God.

What you might not know is that Jesus was quoting scripture. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is the first line of Psalm 22. We all know Psalm 23 – “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want” – a psalm of contentment and peace. That psalm is preceded by a much different psalm – a psalm of desperation and despair. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer; by night, but I find no rest.” On and on it goes, over 20 verses expressing the depths of human pain and anguish. Jesus recalled the first line of that psalm when he was dying on the cross. Perhaps he was recalling the *entire* psalm. For there is much in that psalm that directly applies to his situation: “I am ... scorned by all and despised by the people. All who see me laugh me to scorn ... ‘Trust in the LORD; let the LORD deliver; let God rescue him if God so delights in him’ ... trouble is near, and there is no one to help ... many young bulls encircle me ... I am poured out like water ... my heart within my breast is like melting wax ... my strength is dried up ... my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth ... you have laid me in the dust of death ... a band of evildoers circles round me; they pierce my hands and my feet ... they stare at me and gloat. They divide my garments among them; for my clothing they cast lots.” There are so many parallels here that many Christians believe that Psalm 22 is a prophecy, that the psalmist foretold Christ’s death on the cross. Certainly Jesus saw the parallels, when he quoted the psalm’s opening line.

What I didn’t realize until fairly recently was that as the Psalm continues it turns into something much different. The words of desperation and despair give way to words of thanks and praise. The turn comes right in the middle of verse 21. It begins, “Save me from the lion’s mouth!” – and then suddenly, and seemingly inexplicably, turns to this: “From the horns of wild bulls you have rescued me.” Something *happened* in the middle of that verse. The psalmist’s situation *changed* dramatically. *God*

did ... something. We don't know exactly what. What's clear is that the poet who had been desperate and despairing is suddenly rejoicing. "I will declare your name to my people; in the midst of the assembly I will praise you.... Stand in awe of the LORD ... For the LORD does not despise nor abhor the poor in their poverty; neither is the LORD's face hidden from them; but when they cry out, the LORD hears them." Do you hear how *different* this is from what preceded it? Something *dramatic* has happened. Something has *changed*. God has *delivered* the psalmist from the pain and suffering he was experiencing. The last line of the psalm says: "They shall proclaim God's deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying to them, 'The LORD has acted!'" Those aren't just words. Nobody can *fake* that kind of dramatic change of heart. Something happened to this poet, something *wonderful*, something of *God*.

Something also happened to Jesus. Something that compelled Jesus to go from "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" to "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." *God* happened.

I have no idea what that experience of dying on the cross was like from *Jesus's* perspective. But I know what effect that death had for *us*. It is the ultimate paradox: this horrible, tragic death brings *life* and *hope* to all. Christ's death on the cross did for us what we could *never* do, liberating us from our bondage to sin and death, freeing us to righteousness and life. All of our sins get washed away. We are cleansed, restored, forgiven, *renewed*. Our despair gives way to joy; our desolation gives way to *hope*.

So we, too, sing with the Psalmist. "Stand in awe of the LORD! ... Let those who seek the LORD give praise! ... They shall proclaim God's deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying to them, 'The LORD has acted!'" Yes, the Lord has acted; the Lord has acted indeed. Through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, God brings us *life* and *hope* and *peace*. God did not – *and will never* – forsake us.

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