

Good Friday

Ben Stuart

Why Have You Forsaken Me?

Psalm 22

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of
my groaning?
² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.
³ Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
⁴ In you our fathers trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
⁵ To you they cried and were rescued;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.
⁶ But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.
⁷ All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;
⁸ "He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him;
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!"
⁹ Yet you are he who took me from the womb;
you made me trust you at my mother's breasts.
¹⁰ On you was I cast from my birth,
and from my mother's womb you have been my God.
¹¹ Be not far from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is none to help.
¹² Many bulls encompass me;
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
¹³ they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.
¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
¹⁵ my strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
¹⁶ For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—
¹⁷ I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me;

¹⁸ they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.
¹⁹ But you, O LORD, do not be far off!
O you my help, come quickly to my aid!
²⁰ Deliver my soul from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dog!
²¹ Save me from the mouth of the lion!
You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!
²² I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him,
and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
²⁴ For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him,
but has heard, when he cried to him.
²⁵ From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will perform before those who fear him.
²⁶ The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD!
May your hearts live forever!
²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before you.
²⁸ For kingship belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.
²⁹ All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
even the one who could not keep himself alive.
³⁰ Posterity shall serve him;
it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;
³¹ they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people
yet unborn,
that he has done it.

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD

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"Again and again it has thought Christianity was dying, dying by persecutions from without and corruptions from within, by the rise of Islam, the rise of the physical sciences, the rise of great anti-Christian revolutionary movements. But every time the world has been disappointed. Its first disappointment was over the crucifixion. The Man came to life again. In a sense—and I quite realise how frightfully unfair it must seem to them—that has been happening ever since. They keep on killing the thing that He started: and each time, just as they are patting down the earth on its grave, they suddenly hear that it is still alive and has even broken out in some new place. No wonder they hate us."

C.S. LEWIS

Mere Christianity

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This week is holy week. It is a time when Christians around the globe collectively turn our attention towards the crucifixion, death, and burial of Jesus Christ on our way towards Easter.

It was during the crucifixion of Jesus that he uttered one of the most famous lines in all of human history: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” *It brings up the question, “Why did he say that?”*

Theologian Albert Schweitzer said that cry from Jesus indicated that Jesus died as a deluded apocalyptic. That his messianic expectations when unfulfilled. That when life got hard, this man who preached hope, lost it all in the end. Schweitzer felt it was a cry of utter defeat and ruin at the end of Jesus’ ministry.

If that is true, why do we call it “Good” Friday?

This is both a theological problem and a personal problem. *If God abandoned Jesus (the best person on the planet), what hope do I have when I suffer?* So we need to figure out why Jesus said this, what does it mean for me when I enter my time of suffering, and what we do with all of this.

Why Did Jesus Say This?

Jesus was quoting Psalm 22 when he said this. It is called the “Song of the Innocent Sufferer” and was written most likely by King David a thousand years before Jesus was born.

What was disturbing the writer in verses 1-2? We don’t know for sure what the crisis is. It does not seem to be physical pain but a distress over a sense of God’s distance. He felt a contradiction between his theology and his experience. He says “My God” three times and in that unites transcendence (God’s holiness) and his imminence (God being personally involved with us). Later he would call Him Yahweh, the covenant name of God – a name that represents provider and protector. So the Psalmist is having a crisis, is calling out to God, and is struggling with what seems to be a rejection by God. So he decides

to press into that and try to figure out why God seems distant.

Verse 3 indicates his “rejection” is not a “God problem” since God is holy and does not have a character flaw. The Psalmist then says that God is “enthroned on the praises of Israel.” This language is a reminder of the incense burned in the temple that is supposed to represent how God actively hears the prayers of his people.

Verses 4-5 remind the Psalmist that the fathers of Israel had trusted God, had cried out in the past, and were delivered. But yet he still has a problem, so he focuses on how he might be the problem. He says that he is a “worm and not a man” (verse 6). And what is worse (verse 6-8) is that the silence of God is filled with mockery from his peers. So the psalmist has a secondary problem — the scorn of the people around him who are cruel and are mocking his faith.

But the Psalmist flips it around in verses 9-10 and expresses to God that he may be a nobody, but I am YOUR nobody! It is he who made us and chose us **from birth** and gave us faith!

In verse 11 he cries out “Be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help!” It is interesting that he doesn’t say “solve my problem.” Instead it is personal and relational — “Don’t be far from me!” In the midst of his struggle the Psalmist does not move away from God but toward God. He is struggling with a God that he is allowed to talk to like this. He is supposed to talk to him like this since he is in a covenantal relationship with him. The Bible is a three-dimensional book — it shows you how to struggle with God.

In this Psalm we don’t see someone who has given up. Someone who has given up stops talking. So when Jesus cries out “why have you forsaken me” there is hope present. He is engaging with God the Father. It is a cry FROM hope, not a cry with a lack of hope.

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Commentator John Goldingay writes “When the Psalmist and when Jesus cried out “why have you forsaken me” they weren’t primarily looking for explanation, but for action.” They ask “why” but they mean “stop.”

Verse 11 makes this clear by specifically stating “be not far from me.” This is a picture of fighting for a relationship. The Psalmist prays like this, Jesus prays like this, and we should pray like this. We should engage in the relationship. He is calling you to talk to him like this.

Jesus is honestly communicating his honest anguish on the cross. “He who knew no sin became sin for us.”

Jesus also may have been quoting this Psalm on the cross to teach us. The next few verses seem to zoom past us in terms of the depth of suffering. And it starts to get strangely specific.

Verses 12-18 have two cycles that roughly parallel and talk about the strength of his enemies and the power of the righteous sufferer.

The enemies are pictured as animals – they have power and no conscience. “Strong bulls of Bashan” reference an area known for well-fed livestock. They are also like lions wanting to use their strength to tear him apart. The sufferer is pictured at his weakest – like water and wax.

Verse 15 – “You lay me in the dust of death.” There is a pronoun switch. He is saying that God did that. But there is also hope there. There is hope that God is there despite the presence of the enemies (like the illustration of a parent present for a 2 year olds’ shots in the doctor’s office.)

Verse 16-18 – “Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.” Even though this was written a thousand year before Christ, it is very similar to what happened at the crucifixion. So Christ was calling attention to this Psalm as a way of showing how this was a prophecy about

him. The Gospel writers definitely picked up on that and showed the fulfillment of these prophecies in their writings. Jesus quotes this Psalm so that the disciples in the midst of their suffering could hear a reminder from a thousand years ago saying that there is somebody behind this. That God is ruling over this. That God called this shot, and maybe there is some purpose to all of this. The disciples at that point, however, may still not have understood the purpose.

In verses 19-21 the Psalmist repeats the cry for God to help and be near. In verse 21 he asks to be saved from the mouth of the lion. But **WITHIN THE SAME VERSE** the tense changes and the Psalmist writes “You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen.”

SAVED! Done! When did that happen? The perfect tense of the verb means it is complete. Somehow he goes from being surrounded by bulls, lions, and dogs to being surrounded by the brothers who are praising the God who saves.

In verses 22-24 he is surrounded by friends and they are singing! They are celebrating God because he “has not despised or abhorred the afflictions of the afflicted. He has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him.”

In verses 25-26 a great congregation will celebrate him at a banquet – praising the God who gives life. This after it looked like God rejected him, but he didn’t.

Jesus said as much at the last supper.

Verses 27-31 also says that this is not just for the Jews. “All the ends of the earth” will turn to the Lord. “All the families of the nations shall worship before you.” People of all types and socio-economic backgrounds will come to him. This will be true of that generation and for people of all time – “to a people yet unborn!” People will celebrate Jesus Christ, not in spite of what happened but because of it.

The incredible suffering of Jesus Christ, the righteous one, will result in joy and celebration

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and praise for people of all nations, all families, all walks of life, all statuses for all time! And as you hear that you realize that this Psalm suddenly got a lot bigger than David. That is because it is about the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

He suffered and died at the hands of sinful men according to the express will of God. So that by his blood he could purchase men and women from every tribe and tongue and nation so that we could remember even in our darkest days that kingship belongs to the Lord and that he rules the nations. Your pain is not outside His plan. His plans are good for his children. He who ordained to take the darkest day in history, the crucifixion of Jesus, and make it the instrument of our redemption, will take even your darkest days and redeem them for his glorious purposes. That is true!

So we can say along with the Psalmist, “he has not despised or abhorred the afflicted, he has not hidden his face from me. He heard me.”

Why did Jesus cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He was expressing the anguish of being separated from God. That he, who knew no sin, became sin for us. I think it was a true cry of pain. And I also think he did it as a teacher. To point us to the fact that his suffering was designed by God for greater purposes – our redemption. To call out a congregation that would worship him for all time.

This means we can and we should cry out to God when we are suffering. Whatever you are going through, He wants to hear it. And cry out to him as people who know that if God took the darkest day in history (Jesus’ death) and used it as the means of purchasing the redemption and joy and celebration for people of all nations that he will take your dark days and redeem them for his purposes. You can have that kind of hope.

The writer of Hebrews quotes Psalm 22 as well. Hebrews 2:11 says that JESUS is not ashamed to call us brothers, saying “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.” The writer of Hebrews is

quoting Psalm 22 after the redemption moment. *So the question is “when did Jesus say that?”* We don’t know for sure. Some people think that on the cross, Jesus quoted all of Psalm 22. But we know he said it!

Hebrews 2:14-18 says, *“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”*

We are presented with two pictures of Jesus. First as a champion who fights on our behalf. He beat death so we can have hope in life. He is also presented as a high priest that is sympathetic. Jesus went through enormous suffering to buy our redemption. So when we go through suffering, we know God knows what it is like. He has tasted it.

We also know that the God who ordained that His suffering happen – he also redeemed it. For he works all things for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes.

What happens when we live this story with Jesus? We become mouthpieces of redemption (verse 31) to people around us. As a congregation we celebrate a God who would do this – that takes even our darkest moments and makes them glorious. We celebrate that! He will rescue and redeem through Jesus!

Now go and learn what this means.

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Resources mentioned by Ben Stuart in the endnotes:

Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 19 by Peter Craigie and Marvin Tate

Psalms 1-72 (Tyndale OT commentaries) by Derek Kidner

The Treasury of David by Charles Spurgeon

Endnote:

This is a lament Psalm. These kinds of Psalms usually follow a script that includes a call for justice over the wicked. That doesn't happen in this Psalm. One commentator calls it the 5th Gospel since it is a presentation of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. From the cross, Jesus does not call for judgement, but calls for grace. That is the case in Psalm 22 as well.