



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

The Source of Jesus' Lament

Psalm 22

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Introduction

With this discussion I am beginning a three-sermon arc across Psalms 22–24. I choose these three primarily because they represent three psalm types: individual lament (22); response of trust to a lament (23); and a worship liturgy (24). I choose them also because of how together they serve to illustrate the range of emotion and development of themes that are part of the blessing of the psalms.

In two of these psalms, our study is challenged by our familiarity. Psalm 23 is, of course, the most familiar. We're acquainted with Psalm 22 in a different way, not because we have studied it as often as 23, but because we've read the quotations in the passion accounts in the Gospels. The challenge is twofold. First, because we have heard them often in a particular way, it is hard to hear them with fresh ears. But we should try to do so, for the lessons we know (or think we know) from them can be deepened when we look more closely. Second, we tend to read our Christian perspective back into them to the point that we miss things we would see without that background and its assumptions. My point is not that what we've heard before is wrong, but that we can benefit from the texture and depth gained by stepping outside our customary view.

Our study of Psalm 22 will proceed as follows:

1. Set the stage for understanding by considering how the Gospels impact the way we read it.
2. Overview its theme and parts.
3. Look at some of the lessons we can learn from it, including those we learn from reading it in light of Jesus' experience.

Looking Backward from Jesus' Suffering

The Gospels utilize Psalm 22 to interpret the Jesus' passion. Of the thirteen Old Testament texts that definitely appear in the passion narratives, eight are from the Psalms and five of those are from Psalm 22. Note the following:

- 22.1 in Matt 27.46 = Mark 15.34
- 22.18 in John 19.24; Matt 27.35 = Mark 15.24 = Luke 23.24
- 22.7–8 in Matt 26.24; 27.39, 43; Mark 15.29; Luke 23.35–36
- 22.15 in John 19.28

The best-known quotation is the first, the citation of the theme verse in Matthew and Mark.

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?

Matthew 27.46: And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Mark 15.34: And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

To correctly see what Matthew and Mark intended, we must understand how the Old Testament scriptures were customarily cited in the first century. As James May writes,

It is not just the opening words that are involved. Citing the first words of a text was, in the tradition of the time, a way of identifying an entire passage. Moreover, features of the psalm’s description of the psalmist’s experience appear in the Gospel narrative (v. 7 in Mark 15:29; Matt. 27:39; v. 8 in Matt. 27:43; v. 15 in John 19:28; and v. 18 in Mark 15:24; Matt. 27:35; Luke 23:34; and John 19:24). The very experiences of the one who prays in the psalm become part of the scenario of the passion (Mays 1994, 105).

It is evident that Jesus identified with Psalm 22 because its words are echoed throughout his passion experience. Thus, we should pause to reflect on the fact that the notion of “fulfillment” of Psalm 22 in Jesus’ death is a broader idea than a this-is-that straight-line prediction. As Mays observes,

The very experiences of the one who prays in the psalm become part of the scenario of the passion. So the Gospels draw a connection between the prayers of Jesus and the psalm but as well between the person of Jesus and the person portrayed in the self-description of the psalm. In the intellectual world of Judaism, one of the most important ways of understanding the meaning of present experience was to make sense of the contemporary by perceiving and describing it in terms of an established tradition. That seems to be happening in the connection between the psalm and the passion story (Mays 1994, 105).

Jesus didn’t just fulfill the psalm in the sense of having its events come true in his life (the psalm doesn’t really make any predictions), but in the fact that his experience was similar to the psalmist’s. As Gerald Wilson writes, he “understood it to have special significance to his own life, ministry, and death.” Psalm 22 is a “model of response to abandonment and divine delay with which Jesus could identify and by which he could open windows for others into his own spiritual conflict” (Wilson 2002, 424). In other words, and this is the point in the New Testament’s emphasis, Jesus’ application of Psalm 22 to his circumstances enhances its value for us in helping us endure the trials we face.

A Classic Lament, Followed by Praise

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? (Ps 22.1)

This verse is the psalm’s thematic introduction, summarizing his experience as expressed in verses 1–19 (not just Jesus’ agonized cry from the cross). The psalmist feels that God has completely abandoned him. We appreciate the point the writer makes more if we translate literally from the

Hebrew text: “Why have you forsaken me? (*Why are you*) so far from my deliverance? (*Why are you so far from*) the words of my groaning?” (Wilson 2002, 413). It also helps us to learn that the word *deliverance* (NASB 1995, better than the ESV’s *saving*) is also used in Psalms 18:50; 20:6; and 21:1, 5 to refer to the deliverance God gave to his king or to that which is anticipated as sure to come. In Psalm 22, David (see the psalm’s heading) wants to know where *that* God has gone.

Verses 2–11 elaborate on the silence and absence of God. Verses 2–5 depict it in contrast to what previous generations of God’s people experienced. Verses 6–8 and 9–11 accentuate the emotional power of the feeling of abandonment, contrasting it with the intimacy with God that the psalmist had once known, indeed had known since he had known anything. (Note: the notion of a being a “worm” [v. 6] suggests the idea of being viewed as worthy only of destruction; see Wilson 2002, 415).

Verses 22–31 show the hope he experienced in light of his desperate cry of verses 19-21:

But you, O LORD, do not be far off!
 O you my help, come quickly to my aid!
 Deliver my soul from the sword,
 my precious life from the power of the dog!
 Save me from the mouth of the lion!
 You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!

Notice that God’s nature has impressed him in a way that leads him to *expect* deliverance when all visible evidence points to the opposite expectation. Notice also that the *community* has a significant place in this expectation (see vv. 22, 25, which resume the theme originally seen in v 3). In each case, the reference to the promise to proclaim praise to fellow worshipers is “followed by a passage in which Yahweh is mentioned in the third person, and others are encouraged to praise him by a rehearsal of reasons he is praiseworthy (cf. 22:23-24, 26-31)” (Wilson 2002, 419).

Note well: the psalmist’s plight leads him to absolute faith—he remembers God’s history and realizes that *only* in him is there hope. Every vestige of self-reliance and sufficiency have been stripped away.

Working Back to Jesus

Our overview of Psalm 22 should make it clear that the writers of the Gospels saw Jesus as the ultimate embodiment of the level of trust David extols. As Wilson writes:

The faith modeled by Jesus on the cross was no fairweather religion that trusted in God when the going was good. Neither was it a faith that fled like the disciples when confronted by the harsh realities of rejection, persecution, and indeed execution. His was a faith that experienced the worst the world had to offer—knew what it was to feel abandoned by God—and yet just when it was darkest, as life was slipping away, he was able to proclaim with a final certainty: ‘It is finished!’ (John 19:30). This was not a cry of defeat but of victory—a realization that the purpose of God for the creation was made whole in the work of his faithful Son. Having won his way through to the end, Jesus surrendered his spirit into the hand of God the Father (Luke 23:46). Psalm 22, with its hopeful vision of a future restored to its original purposes, encourages us to do the same (Wilson 2002, 428-429).

In addition to those suggested by Wilson, there are corollary lessons to learn that keep us from relegating Psalm 22 to the better-day-someday category, minimizing the strengthening benefit it can provide to cope with current troubles.

First, we see the importance of community for remaining faithful in suffering. To again cite Wilson,

The psalmist finds support and hope in the worshiping community of the faithful. The enemy may dehumanize and threaten death, but in the congregation of the faithful God's righteous power is still proclaimed. When our faith is undermined by our circumstances and we are tempted to despair altogether, sometimes our only remaining hope is to place ourselves within the worshiping community of God's people. There he is praised even if we are unable to praise him. There the mighty acts of God are proclaimed even when we cannot see them. There God is present even though he remains absent from our own experience. (Wilson 2002, 428).

It is unfortunate, not to mention defeating, that the reaction of many of us to suffering includes pulling back from meaningful participation with the faith community. Conversely, it is distressing that the reason many pull back is because they sense the community is more interested in critiquing their circumstances or failures than in bearing their burdens and helping them through it (cf. Gal 6.2).

Second, Psalm 22 reminds us that there is more to reality than the world's troubles and resulting despair. Even when our world is most tumultuous, God remains on his throne and all creation is moving resolutely toward the goals he intends (Ps 22.3, 25–31). We need this understanding embedded in our faith memory banks so we can draw on it as we look at “the dehumanization of others in war and genocide, the exploitation of the poor by those in power, the lustful twisting of divinely gifted persons into objects of sexual fantasy” (Wilson 2002, 428)—not to mention the power games and corruptions of so-called public servants at all levels whose goals appear to be more about being in charge than serving the public good.

Conclusion

In his reflection on the contemporary significance of Psalm 22, Gerald Wilson shares some verse he wrote during a “whimsical but bitter” time of his life, expressing his frustration as youthful idealism eroded into adult realism:

Is mankind kind? Or would you mind,
If I altered the meter to call him maneater?
Not neater or nicer, a constant surpriser
is man, Kind he's not, not selfless. What
we need I am sure is a Manicure (Wilson 2002, 428)

He then responds to his own despair:

Psalm 22 assures us that the “cure” is at hand. God is present and working for the good purposes for which he created us and the world. That purpose cannot be frustrated but will be accomplished in God's time. The call in the words and images of this psalm is for us to persevere in faithful reliance on God *precisely when he seems most distant!* (Wilson 2002, 428)

Excellent advice for all of us!

Works Cited

- James L. Mays. 1994. *Psalms*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.
- Gerald H. Wilson. 2002. *Psalms—Volume 1*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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