

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Bible Prayers: Psalm 22 (The Passion Psalm)

1 God, God . . . my God!

Why did you dump me
miles from nowhere?

Doubled up with pain, I call to God
all the day long. No answer. Nothing.
I keep at it all night, tossing and turning.

3-5 And you! Are you indifferent, above it all,
leaning back on the cushions of Israel's praise?

We know you were there for our parents:
they cried for your help and you gave it;
they trusted and lived a good life.

6-8 And here I am, a nothing—an earthworm,
something to step on, to squash.
Everyone pokes fun at me;
they make faces at me, they shake their heads:
“Let's see how GOD handles this one;
since God likes him so much, let *him* help him!”

11 And to think you were midwife at my birth,
setting me at my mother's breasts!
When I left the womb you cradled me;
since the moment of birth you've been my God.
Then you moved far away
and trouble moved in next door.
I need a neighbor.

12-13 Herds of bulls come at me,
the raging bulls stampede,
Horns lowered, nostrils flaring,
like a herd of buffalo on the move.

14-15 I'm a bucket kicked over and spilled,
every joint in my body has been pulled apart.
My heart is a blob
of melted wax in my gut.
I'm dry as a bone,
my tongue black and swollen.
They have laid me out for burial
in the dirt.

16-18 Now packs of wild dogs come at me;
thugs gang up on me.
They pin me down hand and foot,
and lock me in a cage—a bag
Of bones in a cage, stared at
by every passerby.
They take my wallet and the shirt off my back,
and then throw dice for my clothes.

19-21 You, GOD—don't put off my rescue!
Hurry and help me!
Don't let them cut my throat;
don't let those mongrels devour me.
If you don't show up soon,
I'm done for—gored by the bulls,
meat for the lions.

22-24 Here's the story I'll tell my friends when they come to worship,
and punctuate it with Hallelujahs:
Shout Hallelujah, you God-worshippers;
give glory, you sons of Jacob;
adore him, you daughters of Israel.
He has never let you down,
never looked the other way
when you were being kicked around.
He has never wandered off to do his own thing;
he has been right there, listening.

25-26 Here in this great gathering for worship
I have discovered this praise-life.
And I'll do what I promised right here
in front of the God-worshippers.
Down-and-outers sit at GOD's table
and eat their fill.
Everyone on the hunt for God
is here, praising him.
"Live it up, from head to toe.
Don't ever quit!"

27-28 From the four corners of the earth
people are coming to their senses,
are running back to GOD.
Long-lost families
are falling on their faces before him.
GOD has taken charge;
from now on he has the last word.

29 All the power-mongers are before him
—worshipping!
All the poor and powerless, too
—worshipping!
Along with those who never got it together
—worshipping!

30-31 Our children and their children
will get in on this
As the word is passed along
from parent to child.
Babies not yet conceived

will hear the good news—
that God does what he says.

The Message (MSG)

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“The Bible Speaks Today” Psalms Commentary devotes two pages to Psalm 23 and eight pages to Psalm 22. It is arguably the most powerful of all the psalms, especially in its depth of feeling, and in its capture of both the depths of despair and the height of rejoicing. Some have suggested that the sudden change of mood implies that two psalms have been stuck together, but human experience does include precisely this depths to height jump: the blackest night followed by the brightest dawn. We remember the psalm mainly because Jesus “quoted it on the cross”, and that in itself justifies the psalm being celebrated. BUT, first Jesus was living the psalm more than quoting it. You don’t search your memory for a suitable quote when you are being crucified! Second, it is part of an Old Testament tradition of over the top descriptions of over the top situations..

There is of course a very cynical way of looking at both the Jesus “quote” and all the other Psalm 22 references in the Gospel narratives: *The Bible writer hunted around for bits of the Old Testament to write up the sad end to a promising ministry.* The Gospels provide their own answer to this cynicism: Jesus kept telling the disciples to look at those parts of the Old Testament – Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job – that represented the Messiah story that wasn’t a story of military conquest but of redemption through suffering. Post-resurrection, they got the message...well maybe Mary M got it earlier than the rest. In other words, Jesus Himself chose the OT references.

The opposite to the cynic’s complaint is the view that Psalm 22 is prophecy – which seems to mean that the psalm had nothing to say to anyone for several centuries, until the prophecy was fulfilled by Jesus. It is better to try, however tentatively, to get into the mind of the writer. On this approach, the poem is the story of a personal journey (maybe King David’s journey), AND the story of a People’s journey: the story of the whole Jewish people on more than one occasion. Note that although the psalm is in part very personal, it is powerfully collective. The whole congregation is invited in. 1 Peter 1 verse 11 seems to reflect Psalm 22. God loves the collective voices of His “friends”. The celebration at the end of the Psalm is described in one commentary as the collective celebration of “Israel by grace, rather than Israel by race”. I like that – though don’t forget the race is included!

Note the specific gathering in of the poor and the hungry. Hard to imagine Jesus throwing a party just for “successful” people.

“The why of the psalmist and the whys of all our hearts are caught up into the why of Jesus, and are answered in his resurrection from the dead.” (A H Rhodes)

Plenty to discuss; but maybe more just to be silent with.