

Psalm 22

The Message

22 ¹⁻² 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!"

⁹⁻¹¹ 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
—worshiping!
All the poor and powerless, too
—worshiping!
Along with those who never got it together
—worshiping!
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.

John Bell (Iona Community) wrote a hymn based on Psalm 22:

O Lord my God, O Lord my God,
why do you seem so far from me,
O Lord my God? **(Chorus)**

Night and morning make my prayer:
peace for this place, and help for there;
waiting and wondering,
waiting and wondering -
does God care, does God care?

Pain and suffering unbound and blind
plague the progress of human kind,
always demanding,
always demanding -
does God mind; does God mind?

Why, oh why do the wicked thrive,
poor folk perish, the rich survive;
begging the question,
begging the question -
Is God alive; is God alive?

Turn again, as you hear my plea,
tend the torment in all I see:
loving and healing,
loving and healing -
set me free, set me free!

If I had to choose just one Psalm, this would be it. It is sometimes called the Passion Psalm. The opening lines, in their “traditional” English form – “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?” - are Jesus’ cry from the cross. But much more of the Psalm is Crucifixion-related, e.g 8-9 and 18-19. Jesus knew this Psalm very well. His early Jewish followers knew it very well. If you believe Jesus said the first line from the cross, you have to believe that Jesus knew the rest of the Psalm, including the “Resurrection” ending of the Psalm when he said that first line. The “Why/” of the Psalmist, and the “Whys?” of all our hearts, are caught up in the “Why?” of Jesus.

It is worth pausing to reflect on the Words from the Cross. First, the nature of crucifixion is that saying anything is very hard and very painful. Nobody being crucified is going to be thinking around for a suitable quotation. Second, it is hard to believe there was a quiet reverend atmosphere; and the disciples were not there to take dictation, (Most of them were not there.) Matthew and Mark say that Jesus cried out “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*”, which is the Aramaic translation (ordinary every day speech) of what we think Jesus would have heard in Hebrew in the synagogue and maybe at home from his mother. Jesus was living Psalm 22, rather than quoting it. It is interesting that some of the Jewish crowd watching clearly neither recognised the Psalm nor got the message: They thought Jesus was shouting for Elijah.

We don’t know the background to the writing of the psalm. It might be prophecy. It is liturgy. It is poetry. It is in line with the Old Testament theme of the Suffering Servant, and it does seem to reflect lived experience: experience of despair and suffering, and the experience of elation with joyful praise. The sudden switch from darkness to light may have been change of mood rather than change of circumstances. God never is absent. God can feel far away. Finding God at our lowest point is not uncommon.

There is no “revenge on enemies” in this Psalm. What we do have is a striking
Universalism: God for all time and all people. Something else built in is that passionate
commitment not to “leaving it all to God”, but to trusting God to use me,