

Session 2: Psalm 22

Plea for Deliverance from Suffering and Hostility

To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

³ Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.

⁴ In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.

⁵ To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

⁶ But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.

⁷ All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

⁸ 'Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!'

⁹ Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.

¹⁰ On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

¹¹ Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

¹² Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

¹³ they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravener 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 mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

¹⁶ For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.

My hands and feet have shrivelled;

¹⁷ I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
¹⁸ they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.

¹⁹ But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
²⁰ Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
²¹ Save me from the mouth of the lion!

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

²² I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
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;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

²⁴ For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.

²⁵ From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

²⁶ The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live for ever!

²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.

²⁸ For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.

²⁹ To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.

³⁰ Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,

³¹ and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

Commentary

Consecrated by the dying breath of Jesus on the cross and frequently chosen by New Testament writers to communicate better the mystery of the cross (13 times, 9 in the account of the Passion),

Psalm 22 has equally deep roots in Old Testament religious life. The motif of being called from the mother's womb (vv.10-11) links Psalm 22 with Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5; 20:14-18), the songs of the suffering servant (Isaiah 49:1; Galatians 1:5) and Job (3:3-12).

The role of Psalm 22 as a carrier of Israel's faith in times of distress appears in its stages of composition. First, after a long ordeal of sickness and imprisonment (vv.2-22), an individual sufferer realizes that God is truly listening (v.22) and so anticipates a liturgy of thanksgiving in the Temple, including a sacred meal (vv.23-27). Then by its exquisite beauty, the psalm found its way into Temple liturgy and became the property of all Israel. Within this communal setting, the psalm absorbed later developments about outreach to the nations (Isaiah 56:1-8; Jonah) and life after death (Daniel 12:1-3). At this point vv.28-32 were added. Then from the cross, Jesus again individualized the psalm. Jesus cried out according to the vernacular form of the Aramaic language, not the classical rendition of the Hebrew. In death, human cords and childhood memories hold firmly. Finally, the Evangelists in their preaching and writing gave the psalm a new communal setting, weaving its phrases into their story of the Passion.

The long opening section is divided into seven units:

1. Vv.2-3 – introductory cry of agony
2. Vv.4-6 – confession of faith
3. Vv.7-9 – lament
4. Vv.10-11 – prayer of confidence
5. V.12 – prayer
6. Vv.13-19 – lament
7. Vv.20-22 – prayer

Verses 2-3 and 20-22 form an inclusio by repeating three key words: distant, save or salvation, and hear. Translations sometimes appeal to the LXX for modifying the starkness of the Hebrew thought. Verse 2, "Distant from my salvation," and v. 22 "you hear me," are made to read "Distant from my outcry" and "my wretched self." The Greek version is less threatening to the theology that God always hears prayers. Keeping the Hebrew intact, one not only preserves the inclusio, an important Hebrew rhetorical device, but one also realizes that the transition to a prayer of thanksgiving (vv.23-27) came from a silent perception of faith, "God hears!"

Three times repeating in vv.4-6 "our ancestors trusted in you," the psalmist will not abandon faith, even though seemingly abandoned by God. Yet is the psalmist protesting too much and about to give up? It is difficult to distinguish the mystic darkness of faith (Psalm 139:11-12) from the black void of unbelief (1 Samuel 28:8-25; John 13:30).

Ridicule and shame besmear the psalmist in 22:7-9. He is like a worm (cf. Job 25:6). Though the ancestors were not shamed (Psalm 22:6), the psalmist definitely is and so is experiencing the reverse of what faith teaches. When v.9 is paraphrased by the leaders against Jesus on the cross (Matthew 27:41-43), the Evangelist was associating Jesus with the devastated psalmist.

A series of metaphors in vv.11-19 articulate physical and psychological pain. Therefore, it is better not to take literally "they pierce my hands and my feet" (v.17b). In fact, the Hebrew does not

5. Does it help you to recall the past in times of desperation? How would you rephrase verses 3-5 or 9-11?

6. If you were to host a feast to celebrate God's grace to you, what's one thing you'd say in proposing a toast to your King?

7. Since Jesus, gentiles, the poor, the rich, people present and people future are all invited to Jesus' feast (vv.22-31), how then will you reach out to others? Whom could you invite to Jesus' feast this week?

8. The author of Hebrews quotes v. 22 saying Jesus is "not ashamed to call them brothers" (Hebrews 2:11-12). Do you ever think of Jesus as "brother"? What does this relationship mean to you?