

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Leader's Guide, Lesson Four

PSALM 22

The Suffering and Vindicated King

Lesson at a glance

This is the cross lesson, and it is the most demanding hour in the series. Psalm 22 begins with a man who feels abandoned by God, moves through mockery, wagging heads, a body coming apart, thirst, exposure, and soldiers gambling for his clothes, and then turns in the middle of verse 21 and never looks back. By verse 22 the rescued sufferer is praising God in the assembly. By verse 31 the ends of the earth are worshiping and a people not yet born are being told what God has done. The Gospel writers reach for this psalm again and again in their crucifixion accounts, and Hebrews 2:12 puts verse 22 directly into the mouth of the risen Christ. The single most important thing you can do as a leader is refuse to let the class stop at verse 21. The psalm's own ending is what tells us how to hear its opening cry.

Goals for this session

First, that each person would see, from the text and not from a teacher's assertion, how closely the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion track this psalm.

Second, that the class would hear the cry of Matthew 27:46 the way Psalm 22:24 teaches us to hear it, without either softening what Jesus bore or claiming more than Scripture says.

Third, that the class would understand the great turn at verse 22, and would see in Hebrews 2:11 to 12 that the risen Christ leads His people's praise.

Fourth, that anyone in the room who feels unheard by God would leave holding verse 24 rather than only verse 1.

Preparing to lead

Read Psalm 22 straight through every day this week, out loud. Do not study it first; just read it, all thirty-one verses, until the shape of it is in you. The turn at verse 21 will start to land emotionally, which is exactly what you want when you lead the discussion.

Read Matthew 27:32 to 54, Mark 15:22 to 39, Luke 23:32 to 49, and John 19:16 to 30 in one sitting with the psalm beside you, and mark the correspondences yourself before you look at the lesson questions. Pay particular attention to John 19:23 to 24, where John takes the two halves of Psalm 22:18 as two distinct actions.

Read Hebrews 2:5 to 18 whole. Then pray. Ask God to keep you from two opposite failures this hour: a lesson so technical that nobody weeps, and a lesson so emotional that nobody learns anything. Ask Him also for wisdom about the people in your class who are suffering right now with no rescue in sight.

Sensitive topics in this lesson

Feeling forsaken by God. Somebody in your class prayed verse 1 this week and did not tell anyone. Psalm 22 gives them permission, and verse 24 gives them ground to stand on. Do not rush to fix it. Say clearly that this prayer is in the Bible, that God put it there, and that His Son prayed it. Then get to verse 24 before the hour is over.

The teaching that the Father abandoned the Son. Many in the class have heard sermons or songs saying that the Father turned His face away and that the fellowship of God was torn apart at Golgotha. Handle this with care and without ridicule; people love those songs, and the instinct behind them is a reverent one. Say what Scripture says. Jesus truly bore our sin and our curse (2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13), and the cry is not play-acting. But Psalm 22:24 says God "has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him," and 2 Corinthians 5:19 says that in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself. Jesus went to the cross saying "Father" (Luke 23:34, 46) and had said the night before, "I am not alone, for the Father is with me" (John 16:32). The honest position is to affirm the depth of what He bore and to decline to describe a rupture inside God that Scripture never describes.

Graphic suffering. Verses 14 to 18 are hard to read aloud, and some in the class have watched someone die badly, or have survived violence themselves. Read those verses, do not skip them, but read them plainly rather than dramatically, and do not linger there for effect.

The textual footnote at verse 16. When a class discovers that Bible manuscripts differ at a famous verse, some are fascinated and one or two get frightened. Get ahead of it. Explain the situation simply and honestly. Explain that this is exactly why translations print footnotes, that having many manuscripts is a strength and not a weakness, and that our confidence in the psalm's connection to the cross does not depend on this line, since no New Testament writer ever quotes verse 16.

Suffering that has not been vindicated yet. Psalm 22 turns. Many lives in your room have not turned yet, and a lesson about rescue can land badly on a person still in verses 12 to 18. Name that out loud, kindly. The psalm does not promise the turn comes quickly; it promises that God hears, and Hebrews 2 promises that the One who leads our praise came through the same ground first.

People who have never obeyed the gospel. This lesson is about the death that saves. If it opens a door for someone, walk through it quietly after class rather than from the front. This is the heaviest hour in the series, and it does not need an appeal added to it; let the cross do its own work, stay afterward, and be easy to talk to.

Suggested 60- to 75-minute schedule

Five minutes: welcome.

Five minutes: open in prayer. Read Psalm 22:1 to 5 aloud before you pray.

Five minutes: warm-up. Read verses 1 and 2 again, let the room be quiet for thirty seconds, and ask what it is like to hear those words in the mouth of Jesus.

Thirty-five to forty minutes: discussion. Choose six or seven questions in advance.

Five to ten minutes: "Your response" reflection.

Five minutes: closing prayer, after singing together.

Discussion priorities

Make sure these are among the questions you discuss: 7 (the great turn, and especially 7c, verse 24 beside verse 1), 9 (the cry), 10 (the mockery), 11 (the divided garments), and 13 (Hebrews 2 and the congregation). If time is short, do not skip 7c. It is the hinge of the whole lesson, and everything the class carries home about the cry from the cross depends on it.

Notes on key questions

Question 2. Verses 1 and 2 give two things: the sense of being forsaken, and the experience of praying without an answer by day and by night. Point out what he calls God while he says it: "my God, my God." This is covenant language, not the language of a man walking away. In verses 3 to 5 the ground shifts from feeling to knowledge. God is holy; God is enthroned on the praises of Israel; the fathers trusted, and trusted, and cried, and were rescued, and were not put to shame. Some form of "trust" occurs three times in verses 4 and 5. Repetition in Hebrew poetry is emphasis, and the emphasis is deliberate. He is preaching to himself the very truth the mockers will fling back at him in verse 8.

Question 6. Verses 16 to 18 give the exposure, the piercing, the staring crowd, and the gambling for clothes. Question 6b is where the parallelism skill earns its keep, so slow down. Psalm 22:18 has two halves: "they divide my garments among them" and "for my clothing they cast lots." Read them as ordinary Hebrew parallelism and you would take them as one action said twice. John, however, records two distinct actions in John 19:23 to 24: the soldiers divided the outer garments into four shares, one for each soldier, and then, rather than tear the seamless tunic, they cast lots for it. John says explicitly that this was "to fulfill the Scripture." Let the class see that John was reading the line very closely indeed. Do not overstate the point into a rule; parallel lines usually do say one thing twice. Here the second line turned out to be exact.

Question 7. The turn is in verse 21. The first half is still a plea, "Save me from the mouth of the lion," and the second half is already praise, "You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen." Verse 22 announces what the rescued man will do: tell of God's name to his brothers and praise Him in the midst of the congregation. Question 7c is the center of the lesson. Verse 24 says what God did not do: He did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted, and He did not hide His face from him. And it says what God did: He heard when he cried. Have someone read verse 1 and then verse 24 back to back,

aloud, and give the room a moment. The man who asked why God had forsaken him tells us, in the same psalm, that God had not hidden His face. That is the psalm's own commentary on its own opening line, and it is the guardrail for everything else the class will say about the cry from the cross.

Question 9. Matthew 27:45 to 46 and Mark 15:33 to 34 both place the cry at the ninth hour, about three in the afternoon, after three hours of darkness that began at noon. Both preserve the sound of the words He actually spoke and then translate them, which tells you the Gospel writers wanted their readers to hear exactly what the bystanders heard. The words are Psalm 22:1. The point of 9b and 9c is that quoting the first line of a well known song is a way of invoking the whole song. Anyone in that crowd who knew the Psalter would have had the rest of Psalm 22 running through his mind as he stood there, including verses 16 to 18 and including verse 31. Jesus was not merely expressing anguish, though He was doing that. He was identifying Himself, in Scripture's own words, as the sufferer of that psalm.

Question 10. The matches with Psalm 22:6 to 8 are close: those who passed by "derided him, wagging their heads" (Matthew 27:39, compare Psalm 22:7), and the chief priests with the scribes and elders said, "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him" (Matthew 27:43, compare Psalm 22:8). The irony is worth sitting with. The religious leaders of Israel mocked Jesus in words drawn from Israel's own hymnbook, and by doing so they turned themselves into the very characters the psalm describes. Nobody planned that. Make the point that this is not a case of Jesus arranging circumstances to look like a prophecy; He could not have scripted His enemies' taunts or the soldiers' dice.

Question 11. Covered partly under question 6. For 11b, be careful and be honest. Psalm 22:15 says "my tongue sticks to my jaws," and the thirst of John 19:28 belongs in that world. But the Scripture John most likely has in view when he adds "to fulfill the Scripture" is Psalm 69:21, "for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink," which is quoted by the sour wine of John 19:29. Tell the class both things. It costs us nothing to be precise, and Psalm 22 has plenty of correspondences that need no stretching. The class will trust your handling of the strong evidence more if they have seen you decline to overclaim the weak.

Question 13. Hebrews 2:11 to 12 quotes Psalm 22:22 and puts it in the mouth of Jesus: "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise." Two observations to draw out. First, the Hebrew word for "congregation" in Psalm 22:22 is qahal, Israel's assembly, and the Greek Old Testament renders it ekklesia, the same word the New Testament uses for the church. Second, notice what the vindicated sufferer does first: he goes to the assembly and praises God among his brothers. Hebrews takes this as the risen Christ leading the praise of His people. This is not a private devotional thought; it is why the assembly of the saints matters. When the church sings, Christ is not an audience. He is the lead singer, and He is not ashamed to call the singers brothers. We will return to this in Lesson Twelve, so plant it well here.

Question 14. The last words of Psalm 22:31 in Hebrew are a short phrase usually rendered "that he has done it." John 19:30 records Jesus saying "It is finished." Do not build an argument on identical vocabulary in two different languages; the psalm's phrase and John's word are not a quotation. Do draw the plain observation. The psalm that begins with a question ends with an accomplishment, and the

death that begins with a question ends with an accomplishment, and in both cases the achievement is God's and the work is complete. The answer to "what is left for us to add to it" is nothing. What is left is to receive it, obey it, and tell it (verse 31).

About the Study Skills in this lesson

Two Study Skills appear in Lesson Four. Recognizing Hebrew Parallelism is the basic grammar of reading the Psalms, and this lesson gives an unusually vivid payoff at verse 18, where the two halves of one line turned out to describe two separate things the soldiers did. Teach the skill as a normal reading habit rather than a code-breaking technique. Letting Scripture Interpret Scripture is the more important of the two, and it is the skill that protects the class doctrinally all through the rest of this series. The rule to leave with them is simple: never let one verse outvote its own chapter. A reader who stops at Psalm 22:1 will teach something the psalm itself denies at verse 24. That is a lesson worth far more than this one hour.

A suggested closing prayer

Pray your own prayer. A sample, if you would like one:

"Father, we have read the psalm Your Son prayed while He was dying, and we do not have words for what He bore. Thank You that He went down into the dust of death for us, that He was numbered with the mockers' scorn and the soldiers' dice, and that He did not come down. Thank You that You heard Him. Thank You that the psalm does not end in the dark, and that today, on the other side of the world from where David wrote, we are among the people yet unborn who have been told what You have done. Be near to everyone in this room who is still praying the first verse and waiting for the twenty-second. Teach us to sing with the Brother who is not ashamed of us. In the name of the crucified and risen King we pray. Amen."

Looking ahead to Lesson Five

Next week is Psalm 40 and the passage that quotes it, Hebrews 10:5 to 10. The theme is the obedient Servant: "Sacrifice and offering you have not desired, but you have given me an open ear. Behold, I have come to do your will." Ask the class to read Psalm 40 whole and Hebrews 10:1 to 18 before class. Warn them in advance that when Hebrews quotes the psalm it reads "a body have you prepared for me," while their Old Testament reads something about ears, and tell them we will look at that honestly and that there is a good answer. It is a fitting sequel to Psalm 22, because it tells us what the death of Christ accomplished that the blood of bulls and goats never could.