

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lesson Four

PSALM 22

The Suffering and Vindicated King

At noon the sun went out. For three hours a darkness that nobody could explain lay over Jerusalem and over the hill outside the city wall where three men were dying. Then, near three in the afternoon, the man in the middle shouted. What He shouted was not a new thing. It was the first line of a song the people standing there had sung all their lives.

Psalm 22 is the psalm of the cross. It is the most detailed of them all, and it moves through the darkest ground in the Psalter before it comes out into the widest light. It begins with a man who feels abandoned by God and it ends with the ends of the earth turning to the LORD. Read it once and you will see why the Gospel writers reached for it again and again as they told the story of Good Friday.

Read Psalm 22 all the way through, several times, this week. Do not stop at verse 21. Then read Matthew 27:32 to 54, Mark 15:22 to 39, and John 19:16 to 30 with the psalm open beside you, and mark every line of the psalm you hear echoed in the Gospels. Finally read Hebrews 2:10 to 13. Come to class having read the whole psalm, not just the first line of it.

First impressions

The superscription reads, "To the choirmaster: according to The Doe of the Dawn. A Psalm of David." "The Doe of the Dawn" was almost certainly the name of a tune, the way we might write "St. Anne" over a hymn. This is a lament, and it is a lament of David. Something in his own life pressed these words out of him: enemies circling, strength gone, and heaven silent. But you should notice as you read that some of the detail goes past anything recorded of David. So far as we know, no one ever gambled for David's clothes while he watched. The Spirit gave him words that fit his own extremity and that fit, far more exactly, a death that would take place a thousand years later.

1.
 - a. Read Psalm 22 through twice, once quickly and once slowly. Where does the mood of the psalm change? Mark the verse.
 - b. What surprises you most about the psalm, especially about its second half?

My God, my God (22:1–5)

The psalm opens with the loudest complaint in the Bible and the tenderest address in the Bible in the same breath. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The man feels abandoned, and he says so out loud, to God, twice calling Him "my God." He is not walking away. He is holding on with both hands while asking why. Then in verses 3 to 5 he does something you should watch for in every lament: he turns from what he feels to what he knows. God is holy. God is enthroned on the praises of Israel. The fathers trusted, and were delivered, and were not put to shame. All of that is still true, and none of it is being felt.

2.
 - a. Read 22:1 to 2. What two things is the sufferer experiencing in these verses? Notice what he calls God even as he asks the question.
 - b. Read 22:3 to 5. What does he affirm about God in verse 3? How many times does some form of the word "trust" appear in verses 4 and 5, and why does the repetition matter?

For Thought and Discussion: God put a prayer of feeling forsaken into His own songbook, and then His Son prayed it. What does that tell you about whether a Christian is allowed to say to God, out loud, that He seems absent? What is the difference between praying like verse 1 and walking away from God altogether?

A worm and not a man (22:6–8)

Verse 6 is the lowest self-description in the Psalms. The Hebrew word for worm here is the word used for the little crimson grub from which scarlet dye was made, a thing crushed for its color. He is not saying he is worthless in God's sight; he is saying that this is what the crowd has made of him. And then the crowd speaks. They make mouths at him, they wag their heads, and they throw his own faith back in his face: "He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!" That is the cruelest sentence in the psalm, and it is the one that turns up almost word for word at the foot of the cross.

3. Read 22:6 to 8. List the specific things the onlookers do and say. Which of them is aimed at his body, and which at his faith?

From my mother's womb (22:9–11)

Having quoted the mockers, the sufferer answers them, and his answer is not an argument. It is a memory. You took me from the womb. You made me trust you at my mother's breasts. On you was I cast from my birth. He goes back behind the pain to the earliest evidence he has that God has been his

God, and he stands on it. Then verse 11 asks the only thing he asks in this whole first half: do not be far from me. There is none to help.

4.
 - a. Read 22:9 to 11. How far back does the sufferer reach for evidence that God is his God? Why is that a wise place to reach in a dark season?
 - b. What is the single request of verse 11? Compare it with verse 19. What does he actually want most?

Study Skill, Recognizing Hebrew Parallelism: Hebrew poetry does not rhyme sounds; it rhymes thoughts. A verse usually comes in two lines, and the second line either says the first again in different words, or sharpens it, or turns and says the opposite. Verse 1 shows it plainly: "why have you forsaken me" is echoed by "why are you so far from saving me." Learn to read the two lines together rather than mining each for a separate doctrine. But learn also that the two lines are not always identical. Sometimes the second adds something real. You will see one of the most striking examples in Scripture at verse 18, where a Gospel writer noticed that the two halves of the line describe two different actions.

Bulls, dogs, and the dust of death (22:12-15)

The enemies are described as animals: strong bulls of Bashan, a ravaging and roaring lion, and dogs. Bashan was the rich grazing land east of the Jordan, famous for fat, powerful cattle (Deuteronomy 32:14; Amos 4:1). Dogs in the ancient world were not pets. They ran in packs at the edge of town and ate what they found (1 Kings 14:11; Psalm 59:6). Then in verses 14 and 15 the description turns inward, to what dying feels like from the inside: poured out like water, bones out of joint, heart melted like wax, strength dried up like a broken piece of pottery, tongue stuck to the jaws. It is a picture of a body coming apart, hanging, and burning with thirst. The last line is stark: "you lay me in the dust of death."

5.
 - a. Read 22:12 to 13. What three animals are used to describe the enemies, and what does each image contribute?
 - b. Read 22:14 to 15. Put each phrase into ordinary words. What is happening to this man physically?
 - c. Who does verse 15 say has laid him in the dust of death? What do you make of that?

Pierced hands and divided garments (22:16–18)

These three verses hold the details that make readers stop. A company of evildoers has closed in. Hands and feet are named. He can count his bones, which means he is stretched out and exposed while people stand and stare. And his clothing is being divided up and gambled for while he is still alive to watch. Nothing in the recorded life of David matches this. It is one of the places where the psalm plainly reaches past its own author.

6.
 - a. Read 22:16 to 18. What is happening to the sufferer's body, and what are the onlookers doing while it happens?
 - b. Verse 18 is a single line in two halves. What is done with the garments in the first half? What is done with the clothing in the second half? Are those the same action or two different ones?

For Further Study: Verse 16 carries one of the best known textual questions in the Old Testament. Most of the Hebrew manuscripts that have come down to us read something like "like a lion, my hands and my feet," which is hard to make sense of as a sentence. Other Hebrew manuscripts, along with the ancient Greek, Syriac, and Latin translations, read a verb instead: "they have pierced my hands and my feet." A very old Hebrew fragment found in the Judean desert supports the verb as well. In Hebrew the difference is one letter, and two of those letters look nearly alike. That is why the ESV prints "they have pierced my hands and feet" and puts the other reading in a footnote. Two things are worth saying honestly. First, the translators who read it as a verb were working centuries before anyone was crucified at Golgotha. Second, no New Testament writer ever quotes verse 16. The case for reading Psalm 22 as the psalm of the cross does not rest on this line at all. Open your own Bible to the footnote and see what your translation says.

The great turn (22:19–24)

Verse 19 is one more cry for help. And then, in the middle of verse 21, the psalm changes tense and never changes back. "Save me from the mouth of the lion! You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!" He is still asking, and then suddenly he is thanking. Something has happened between one line and the next. God has answered. And the first thing the rescued man wants to do is get into the assembly and tell everyone. Verse 24 is the theological center of the whole psalm, and it is the verse that must be read alongside verse 1: "For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him."

7.
 - a. Read 22:19 to 21. Where exactly does the plea become praise? Mark the line.

- b. Read 22:22. What does the rescued man say he will do, and where will he do it?
- c. Read 22:24 carefully, slowly, three times. What does this verse say God did *not* do? Now put verse 24 beside verse 1. How does verse 24 change the way you hear verse 1?

Study Skill, Letting Scripture Interpret Scripture: The safest commentary on any passage of Scripture is the rest of Scripture, and the nearest and best commentary is usually the passage itself. When a verse is hard, before you reach for anything else, read the whole chapter and ask whether the writer answers his own question. Psalm 22 is the model case. Verse 1 asks why God has forsaken him. Verse 24 answers that God did not hide His face and did hear when he cried. A reader who stops at verse 1 will build a doctrine the psalm itself does not teach. A reader who finishes the psalm will hear the cry the way God's people were meant to hear it. Practice this habit: never let a single verse outvote its own chapter.

To the ends of the earth (22:25–31)

The last seven verses open out like a door swinging wide. The afflicted eat and are satisfied. All the ends of the earth remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations worship. Kingship belongs to the LORD, and He rules the nations. Even the dying, "all who go down to the dust," bow. Then the psalm looks down the generations: posterity will serve Him, and a people not yet born will be told what He has done. The last words in Hebrew are a short phrase meaning something like "that he has done it." One man's rescue has become a worldwide worship service that will still be going on after everyone alive today is dead.

- 8.
 - a. Read 22:25 to 31. Who ends up worshiping in these verses? Count the different groups named.
 - b. How does a psalm that started with one man alone in the dark end up here? What has to have happened in between?

Optional Application: Verse 31 says a people yet unborn will be told what God has done. You are one of them. Somebody told you. This week, tell one person something specific God has done, not something God is generally like. Name the person now, and write down when you will do it.

The Gospels open Psalm 22

Now put the psalm beside the crucifixion accounts. Matthew and Mark both record that at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, both of them preserve the sound of the words He actually used, and both of them then translate those words for their readers: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That is Psalm 22:1. Matthew records that those who passed by derided Him, "wagging their heads," and that the chief priests, scribes, and elders said, "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him." That is Psalm 22:7 and 8, almost word for word, and the men saying it were quoting Scripture without knowing they were fulfilling it. All four Gospels report the soldiers taking His clothes, and John says the soldiers divided the outer garments four ways and then cast lots for the seamless tunic rather than tear it, and that this happened "to fulfill the Scripture." And near the end Jesus said, "I thirst."

9.
 - a. Read Matthew 27:45 to 46 and Mark 15:33 to 34. What time of day was it? What had been happening for three hours? What did Jesus say?
 - b. Read Psalm 22:1. What are the very next words after the ones Jesus quoted?
 - c. If a psalm was known to everyone standing there, what does it mean to quote its first line out loud? What would a listener who knew the psalm have started thinking about?
10.
 - a. Read Matthew 27:39 to 44 beside Psalm 22:6 to 8. List every point where the two passages match.
 - b. Matthew 27:43 is very close to Psalm 22:8. Who is saying it in Matthew, and what does it tell you that the religious leaders of Israel taunted Jesus in the words of a psalm?
11.
 - a. Read Psalm 22:18, then Matthew 27:35 and John 19:23 to 24. What two separate things did the soldiers do with Jesus' clothing, and how do they match the two halves of the psalm's line? What does John say this fulfilled?
 - b. Read Psalm 22:15 and then John 19:28. Jesus said, "I thirst." What in the psalm does that echo? (Note that the sour wine offered in John 19:29 is closer to Psalm 69:21, which we will study in Lesson Six.)

Two things must be said about the cry of verse 1, and they have to be said together. The first is that the cry is real. Jesus was not filling silence with poetry. He was bearing our sin. Paul says God "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21), and that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). Something took place on that cross that we will never be able to measure, and He entered it in our place.

The second thing is that we must not say more than Scripture says. You will hear it claimed that in that moment the Father turned His face away and the fellowship within God was broken. Scripture does not say that, and Psalm 22 comes close to saying the opposite: God "has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him" (22:24). Notice too that Jesus never stopped saying "Father." He said it early, over the men driving the nails (Luke 23:34), and He said it at the end: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46), which is Psalm 31:5. He quoted the first line of a psalm that His hearers knew by heart, from a cross that was fulfilling it line by line, and that psalm ends in rescue, in the assembly, and in the worship of the nations. Say what the text says. Let the psalm interpret the cry.

12. Read Hebrews 2:10 to 13. Verse 12 quotes Psalm 22:22. Who is speaking the words of the psalm, according to Hebrews? Where is He singing, and who is He singing with?
13.
 - a. In Psalm 22:22 the Hebrew word behind "congregation" is the word for Israel's assembly, and the Greek Old Testament renders it with the same word the New Testament uses for the church. What is Hebrews 2:11 to 12 saying about where the risen Christ is when His people gather to sing?
 - b. Why is it significant that the very next thing the vindicated sufferer does, in the psalm and in Hebrews, is praise God among His brothers?

For Thought and Discussion: Hebrews 2:11 says Jesus "is not ashamed to call them brothers." Given what verses 6 to 8 of the psalm say the crowd made of Him, and given what we have made of ourselves, sit with that sentence for a while. Who in your congregation most needs to hear that Jesus is not ashamed of them?

The suffering and vindicated King

Psalm 22 will not let us have half a Christ. If we stop at verse 21 we get a martyr and a tragedy. If we skip to verse 22 we get a triumph with no wounds in it. The psalm insists on both, in that order, and so does the gospel. The one who was laid in the dust of death is the one who now leads the singing. The

suffering was real, the rescue was real, and the result is that people on the other side of the world, three thousand years after David wrote, are worshiping the God of Israel this morning because of what happened on that hill. The psalm's last words say it as plainly as it can be said: He has done it.

14. Compare the last words of Psalm 22 in verse 31 with what Jesus said in John 19:30. What is finished? What is left for us to add to it?

Your response

15. Verse 24 says God has not hidden His face and has heard. Where in your life right now do you most need that to be true? Write it down as plainly as the psalmist wrote his.
16. Psalm 22 moves from a single sufferer to the worship of the nations. Name one specific person, near or far, whose worship you could have some part in. What will you do about it this month?

For the group

Warm-up. Read Psalm 22:1 to 2 aloud and then ask the class, without discussion, simply to sit quietly for thirty seconds. Then ask what it is like to hear those words in the mouth of Jesus. Keep this brief and do not let it become morbid; the lesson has a long way to travel and it ends in praise.

Discussion. The heart of the hour is questions 7, 9, and 10. Question 7c, putting verse 24 beside verse 1, is the one that must not be skipped, because it governs how the whole class hears the cry from the cross. Question 11 on the divided garments is where the Study Skill on parallelism pays off, and it is worth doing slowly with John 19:23 to 24 open. Save enough time for questions 12 and 13; the class should not leave at verse 21.

Wrap-up. Close by reading Psalm 22:22 to 31 aloud without comment, and then Hebrews 2:11 to 12. Then sing something together before you pray. Nothing else will teach the lesson as well as doing what verse 22 says, with the Christ who leads the singing.