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Psalm 22: The Prayer of the Righteous Sufferer

R. Mark Shipp

There are several psalms which have pride of place in the Judeo-Christian appropriation of the Psalms over the ages: Psalm 1, Psalm 23, Psalm 51, Psalm 100, Psalm 148, among others, come to mind. Psalm 22 has a special place in such a litany of psalms, as it serves as an interpretive and structuring guide to the passion narrative in Matthew and Mark. Jesus himself quotes Psalm 22:1 referring to his own suffering and experience of the absence of God. The cry of Jesus from the cross (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) is not a cry of despair, but Jesus’ identification with the righteous sufferer of Psalm 22.¹

Some Textual Difficulties

Any study of Psalm 22 must begin with a close look at the text. Even a glance at modern translations will show that there are several places where they do not agree and where the attentive reader must make decisions concerning the original text.

The first of these occurs in v. 1. It may be that in antiquity, as in our own day, the opening words were “off-putting.” We do not like to think about

¹ This paper is dedicated to Michael R. Weed, my longtime colleague and friend. Michael, more than anyone else, has taught me to read scripture theologically and with a view to its impact on the Church.

God abandoning us. The Greek includes a phrase not present in the Hebrew: “O God, my God, pay attention to me!” It is possible that this phrase was either an ancient gloss, or else was included because the phrase “Let your ears be attentive” or “pay attention to my cry” is common in the psalms and prophetic literature.² Instead of an accusation (“Why have you abandoned me?”), the Greek of Psalm 22 begins with a petition.

Perhaps the most well-known textual problem is in v. 16, where the Hebrew text has “like a lion my hands and feet.” It is not obvious what a lion has to do with the psalmist’s hands and feet. This is made doubly difficult, because the Greek of Psalm 22 reads “they have dug out my hands and feet.” Most English translators read with the Greek instead of the Hebrew, understanding “they have dug out my hands and feet” to mean “they have pierced my hands and feet.”³ While this makes for a satisfying Christological reading of Psalm 22, it is not reflected in the original text, nor is it in any way quoted or alluded to in Matthew 27.

While the difficulties are almost insurmountable, hands and feet “bound” or “shriveled” seems to convey the best sense.⁴ The fact that the text is nowhere alluded to in Matthew 27 is perhaps not surprising if the original did not mention “piercing hands and feet.”

Two more textual difficulties are significant. The first is in v. 20, where the Greek translates the Hebrew *yehīdatī*—“my only”—by *monogenē mou*, “my uniqueness,” or “my only one.” It occurs in Genesis 22:2, 12, and 16

² See especially Ps 5:2, 10:17, 17:1, 55:2, 61:1, 66:19, 86:6, 130:2, and 142:6, and many times in the prophetic literature.

³ The Dead Sea Scrolls may come to our aid here. The Hebrew says *ka’arī*, “like a lion,” which is also reflected in one scroll from the DSS, but other scrolls have *kru* and *kry* (note that the DSS had no vowels). *krh/y* I means “to dig,” hollow out,” followed by the LXX. It is also unclear how one digs or hollows out hands and feet.

⁴ Some have suggested a hypothetical verb *krh* IV, “to wrap,” as in the binding of hands and feet, which may make sense in this context. Roberts (A New Root for an Old Crux, Ps. XXII 17c,” *Vetus Testamentum* 23 [1973]: 247–252) has suggested a *krh* V, “to be shrunken or shriveled,” while Peter Craigie *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco: Word, 1983] suggests a *klh* III, “to be exhausted.” See ESV, NIV, NASB; but compare with NRSV, which has “shriveled,” following Roberts, instead of “pierced.”

with reference to Isaac being offered as the “only (son)” (*yehîd*) of Abraham.⁵ Given Matthew’s use of the psalm in the passion narrative, and the use in Genesis to depict Abraham’s sacrifice of his only son, the statement in 1 John 4:9 has special meaning:

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son (*monogenē*) into the world, so that we might live through him.

My suggestion is that one of the major reasons Matthew uses Psalm 22 in his passion narrative is the possibility of reading the ambiguous Hebrew with “my only (son)” in the Greek.

Verse 21b has long been a crux in the understanding of Psalm 22. A glance at the translations will underscore the problem:

NIV: Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.
 RSV: Save me from the mouth of the lion,
my afflicted soul from the horns of the wild oxen!
 ESV: Save me from the mouth of the lion!
You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!

The issue here has to do with the structure of Psalm 22 and our understanding of the theology of the lament psalms in general. In terms of structure, the question is where the “shift” from lament to praise occurs, as often happens in the individual psalms of lament: at v. 21b,⁶ or v. 22?⁷ If the “response” section of the individual lament indicates that God has *heard* the psalmist’s cry, and at some point will deliver the psalmist in the undisclosed future,⁸ then the fact that God has *answered* the psalmist from the horns of the wild

⁵ It is rare, occurring only 12 times in the Hebrew Bible.

⁶ “Then from the horns of the wild oxen you answered me.”

⁷ “I will declare your name to my brothers.” If v. 22, the shift is completely abrupt, but not unusual, as we see also in Psalm 6 (the radical shift between vv. 7 and 8). If in v. 21b, then the parallelism is interrupted, because the A and B lines no longer exactly correspond. This is not really a problem, as also vv. 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17 do not exactly repeat the thought in synonymous parallelism either.

⁸ Most verbs in the response sections are imperfects, indicating action which has not yet occurred.

ox is highly significant. The answer is that the God who was perceived as far off (vv. 11 and 19) is now close to the psalmist in his distress. More will be said about this below.

The last significant textual problem occurs in v. 29, “All the fat ones (*dishnêy*) of the earth,” which is followed by most English translations. The NRSV translates the phrase with “those who sleep in the earth” (*di yishnêy*), which is parallel to “those who go down to the dust,”⁹ that is, the dead. The NRSV provides a better reading, as it is unclear how “fat ones” equal the living or the dead.

The Structure of Psalm 22

While the structure of ancient poetry is difficult at best, there are patterns and commonalities between this and other lament psalms.¹⁰ Individual laments have three sections. First, an *introduction*, in which the psalmist’s problem is laid out in general terms and the theme of the psalm is expressed. This may be in the form of a petition, a complaint, or even a thanksgiving. Second is the *complaint*, in which the psalmist articulates his problem to the Lord. The complaint may be further subdivided into a variety of components,

⁹ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 1–50*, Anchor Bible Psalms I (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 143.

¹⁰ There are *many* attempts at structuring Psalm 22. These are a few: 1) Gerald Wilson (*Psalms, Volume 1*, NIV Application Commentary [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002], 413–423) suggests the psalm is in four sections: v. 1, “thematic introduction”; vv. 2–11, “the silence and absence of God”; vv. 12–21, “vicious attacks by the enemies”; vv. 22–31, “promise to praise.” This structure appears to follow thematic concerns, rather than form-critical analysis. Mark Hamilton, “Psalm 22,” in *Timeless: Ancient Psalms for the Church Today*, R. Mark Shipp, ed. (Abilene: ACU Press, 2011), 163 suggests a different four part structure: Address (vv. 1–2), the psalmist’s plight (vv. 3–18), call for help (vv. 19–21), and promise to praise (vv. 22–31). Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 79–83, on the other hand, sees only two sections: vv. 1–21, the prayer; and 22–31, the praise. Craigie, *Psalm 1–50*, 198, with many older commentators, suggests the following liturgical structure: lament (vv. 2–22b); response (v. 22c); thanksgiving by the lamenter (vv. 23–27); thanksgiving by the congregation (vv. 28–32). The presence of a radical shift to praise is indicative to Craigie of the liturgical use of these laments. Regardless of the original setting of the pieces of these lament psalms, they have come to us in one piece, lament to praise, and so must be taken as a unit.

but must include a complaint and a petition. The third section is the *response*, in which God is praised for having heard the psalmist. Also in the response the psalmist commonly makes vows to sacrifice and issues calls to praise.¹¹

Psalm 22 is a typical individual lament, with introduction, complaint/petition, and response/call to praise. However, It is atypical in its repetition of all of its component sections. Based upon my analysis, I suggest the following for the structure of Psalm 22:

Vv. 1–2: Introduction/Address to God: This two verse introduction is also the first complaint, in which the psalmist questions God’s distance, failure to respond, and apparent disinterest in the psalmist’s plight. The psalmist has internal and external issues, but his fundamental problem is with God.

*Vv. 3–21a: The Complaint Section:*¹² In this complaint, the psalmist repeats each of its elements twice, to emphasize his lament. First, the *contrast motif* (vv. 3–8 and 9–10), then the first *petition* (v. 11, with a second petition in vv. 19–21a), then the *complaint* (vv. 12–15, with both external threats—enemies as wild animals—and internal distress, repeated in vv. 16–18).

The *Response Section* also repeats almost every element. V. 21b is the response proper (“then from the horns of the wild ox you answered me”), followed by an initial *vow to praise* (v. 22, repeated in v. 25). This is followed by a *call to praise* (v. 23), followed by the reason for praise (v. 24). A call to praise ends the psalm as well, but this time it is universal (vv. 27–31).

Psalm 22 is a highly structured lament of the individual. Let us turn now to look at some significant theological movements in the psalm, based upon the structural analysis above.

¹¹ Tom Long suggests, in his book *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, that the text itself should suggest how we structure and preach our sermons. (*Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 43–52. While Long uses the two part structure of Psalm one to illustrate his point, it is also applicable to the lament psalm. Since individual laments are in three sections, the first one introduces the theme, and the last one ends with praise, we have a convenient three point sermon already organized for us.

¹² I follow, in broad outline, Craigie’s “liturgical model” (Craigie, *Psalm 1–50*, 198) and include in my “complaint section” the lament, the petitions, trust statements, and contrast motifs.

The Theology of Psalm 22

Vv. 1–2: The Introduction/Address: Psalm 22 is unusual in its “cry of dereliction,” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This terminology occurs only one other time in the Old Testament, in Lam 5:20, relative to the destruction of Jerusalem:

Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?

The cry of dereliction is unsettling, suggesting to the reader that it is possible for God to “turn his face” from us, to abandon us. One might counter that the abandonment is perceived, but not real, meaning that God will inevitably come to deliver in the nick of time.

But what does the “nick of time” mean to the one who suffers? What did it mean to Job? Lament psalms are honest, faithful cries to God. What does it mean to say “It may *feel* as if God is absent, but he really is present,” to the one who experiences God’s absence in pain, loss, death, or persecution? To the one who laments, such abstractions are meaningless. So we are left with the honest and righteous cry of the laments—“Why are you so far away”—regardless of whether the absence and silence of God are “real” or only perceived. The introduction brings us immediately to the problem of all faithful people who suffer: the problem of the absence and silence of God.

One thing to keep in mind, as Mays reminds us, is that the cries to God in the lament psalms are faithful cries. It is addressed from the very beginning to “my God,” the claim and confession of relationship. It is not some estranged or distant deity who is invoked; it is the covenant God of Israel’s history (vv. 3–5), whose covenant commitment is to hear all who cry out to him (Ex 2:23–25; Deut 26:7).

Vv. 3–21a: The Complaint: I recently had a discussion with someone who informed me that the lament psalms were composed by a “bunch of whiners.” We are also told from the time we are young that we should not complain. The perception many have about lament psalms is that they are inappropriate and faithless whining, since we are the people who live A.D.,

not B.C., and should be characterized by praise. To tell someone “You should not lament” strikes me as strange as a father telling an injured child, “Stop that crying! It’s not right!” Believers are not special because they lament—everyone laments. What is different about the believer’s lament is that it is addressed to the Lord. It is our faithful cry to our Father, when all we have left to offer is our lament. To fail to bring our laments to the Lord, on the other hand, is faithless.

The “contrast motifs” in vv. 3–8 and 9–10 distinguish between a holy God, “enthroned on the praises of Israel,” who answered the cries of Israelites in the past, and the sad, un-holy, state of the lamenter, who is mocked rather than “enthroned by praises.” The theological thrust of the passage is “You responded to those in the past who cried out, but now I cry out and you are silent and far off.”

Despite the apparent absence and silence of God to the psalmist, he makes his first petition in v. 11. This petition recalls the introductory statement (that God is distant and silent to the psalmist). “Why are you far off?” in the introduction is seconded by this first petition, “Do not be far away.”

The complaint is repeated, as are the other movements of this psalm. The problem is two-fold. First is the problem of the enemies, who are depicted as savage beasts, circling and rending the psalmist.¹³ Second is the problem of his physical distress. It is tempting to think of the enemies as the same ones who mock his plight in vv. 7–8, and, if so, there may be a connection between the physical distress of the psalmist in vv. 14, 15, and 17, and the presence of the enemies.

In the conventional wisdom of the ancients, suffering was a consequence of sin, and so the suffering of the psalmist was a sure sign of God’s rejection and punishment (cf. John 9:2). On the other hand, the suffering of the psalmist could have been brought about *by* the mockery and enmity of the enemies. It does little good to speculate which distress came first, the physical or the

¹³ Equating enemies with wild beasts occurs occasionally in lament psalms, which portray the foes as ravenous lions (e.g., Pss. 7:2, 10:9, 17:12), or as dogs (59:6).

social. To the psalmist, suffering is *holistic*, involving all parts of the human: physical, social, emotional, and spiritual: his *self* is “poured out,” his *bones* are separated (his body in distress), his *heart*, the seat of the will and deliberation, is melted, and his *strength*, his power of action, is dried up. When the psalmist suffers, his entire being suffers. One thinks in this regard of Job and his three friends.

The second petition (vv. 19–21a) makes the request explicit. Whether the problem is social or physical is immaterial. The psalmist requires saving. As with the introduction and the first petition, part of the psalmist’s problem is the absence and silence of God, so he first cries out for God to not be far off. Second, he cries out for the Lord to deliver and save him from his enemies.

As often occurs in lament psalms, once a petition is made, once the cry to the Lord for help is uttered, the God who is “far off” becomes the God who is “near.” This may help explain the abrupt shift from lament to praise in many of the lament psalms.¹⁴ God, whose covenant commitment is to be near to all who cry out to him, has been invited into the pit with the psalmist. The depths where God was *not* are now the depths where God *is*. This presence of God with the psalmist in the Pit is what enables him to shift from lament to praise. Whether the physical ailment or affliction of the enemy has yet been removed is doubtful, but praise ushers forth from the psalmist, because the one who answers him on the horns of the wild ox has joined him in the Pit.

The *response section* repeats all of its major movements as well, underscoring the lament and the praise elements. It is important to remember that

¹⁴ I suggest here that the common understanding of the “shift” from lament to praise in most individual laments was liturgical, that is, laments did not originally have the praise hymn as their conclusion, but this was supplied by a priest or appended at a later date, is not necessarily the best way of approaching lament psalms theologically. Note, for example, Peter Craigie’s comment on the liturgical nature of lament psalms:

The words [i.e., the response] come in such a striking contrast to the preceding lament and prayer, that one must presuppose the declaration of an oracle (Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 19; Waco: Word, 1983), 198.

the verbs in the vows and the calls to praise are all in the Hebrew equivalent of our future tense. Deliverance has likely not yet come, but is still to occur at some undisclosed time, in God's reckoning. Also, the movement in individual laments is from isolation to re-incorporation into the community of faith. When one laments, one apparently laments alone, but there is no "individual hymn of praise" in the book of Psalms. Restoration to community is anticipated in virtually all of the lament psalms.

Another feature to underscore is the universal nature of the final call to praise. Not the psalmist alone, but the entire cosmos is called to join in the hymn of praise. First, the call goes out to "those who seek the Lord," presumably Israel (v. 26). Then the ends of the earth—the "families of the nations," all the Gentiles—are called to worship (vv. 27–28), followed by the living (v. 29a), the dead, (29b),¹⁵ and finally the unborn (vv. 30–31) are all called upon to worship and praise the Lord. We are reminded here of Psalm 148, the Great *Hallel*, where the heavens, the earth, and the underworld are all called upon to praise God.

The Use of Psalm 22 in Matthew's Passion Narrative

Gerald Wilson suggests in his commentary that Psalm 22 in the passion narrative has such a gridlock on our psyches that it is difficult, if not impossible, to read the psalm on its own terms, for its own theology and message.¹⁶ Mays adds a further caveat:

Because of the close connection of Psalm 22 with Jesus, it became the predominant custom in the early church to take the psalm as Jesus' words and relocate it completely in a Christological context. This results in understanding the psalm in terms of Jesus. But the canonical relation between passion narrative and psalm invites us also to undertake to understand Jesus in terms of

¹⁵ See note 5 above. Reading "those who sleep in the earth" with the NRSV.

¹⁶ Wilson, *Psalms, Volume 1*, 424. Note that by the time of Justin Martyr, ca. 155 A.D., the original context of the psalm has been lost and completely relocated in prophecy concerning the death and resurrection of Christ (see *St. Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho* [Trans. Thomas B. Falls; Selections of the Fathers of the Church, vol. 3; Washington: Catholic University of America, 2003], 148–160).

the psalm, that is, to view him through the form and language of this prayer. That would be to follow the example of the apostles and evangelists by using the psalm as a hermeneutical context.¹⁷

Wilson also says that it is only by reading the text in its own theological and cultural context that Matthew's and Mark's use of it can become clear and meaningful. It is possible, on the other hand, to so relegate Psalm 22 to Iron Age irrelevance that it ceases to have meaning for other contexts.

Psalm 22 has three to five quotes or allusions in Matthew 27 (only three in Mark 15).¹⁸ These are, in Matthean order, dividing the clothing and casting lots for it, in Matt 27:35 (Ps 22:18); "Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—let him rescue the one in whom he delights," in Matt 27:43 (Ps 22:8); and the cry of dereliction, in Matt. 27:46 (Ps 22:1). In addition, there may be other allusions, such as the crowd mocking Jesus (Matt 27:39; compare with Ps 22:7, the enemies shaking their heads and mocking), and Reumann includes "the one who cannot keep himself alive" (Ps 22:29c), which he says has an allusion in Matt. 27:42.¹⁹

I pointed out earlier that other imagery or terminology used in the psalm make it uniquely qualified for appropriation as the messianic psalm *par excellence*. Psalm 22 was read as a psalm of David by the 1st century A.D., suggestive of Messianic application. The translation of *yehidatî* ("my only one") as *monogenē mou* in the Greek was suggestive both of Jesus as God's only son and of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. The psalmist being cast upon God from birth (Ps 22:10) may have been suggestive also of Jesus' special relationship with the father from birth. Along with the direct allusions and quotations, there could not be a better psalm with which to organize the passion narrative. The point is, Matthew used the entire psalm, and not just a

¹⁷ Mays, "Prayer and Christology: Psalm 22 as Perspective on the Passion," *Theology Today* 42 (1985), 323.

¹⁸ Richard Bauckham suggests that there are five in Mark's passion narrative [*Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 256]. Psalm 69 also has one or two allusions, as does Isaiah 53.

¹⁹ John Reumann, "Psalm 22 at the Cross: Lament and Thanksgiving for Jesus Christ," *Interpretation* 28 (1974), 42.

few select quotes, in the constructing of the passion narrative, including the characterization of the suffering of the lamenter, his persecution, his cry, and finally his triumph and praise.²⁰

Matthew is the Gospel interpreter *par excellence* of the Old Testament, particularly the Psalms and Isaiah, as prophetic of Jesus Christ. The Psalms, no less than the prophets, were understood to be “hymnic prophecy.” The laments of David and the Royal Psalms were fertile ground for application to the ministry, the death, and the resurrection of Christ.²¹ New Testament passages clearly make allusion to the prophetic function of Old Testament texts, in some sense prefiguring or pointing to the suffering and exaltation of Jesus:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look! (1 Peter 1:10-12)

He said to them, “Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? (Mark 9:12)

The Old Testament prophetic texts, including select psalms (with 24 quotations or allusions to Psalm 22 in the New Testament), were understood to predict or foreshadow the sufferings and glory of Jesus Christ.

²⁰ See Keith Campbell, “Matthew’s Hermeneutic of Psalm 22:1 and Jer. 31:15,” *Faith and Mission* 24 (2007): 46–58. Also, Mays has an insightful article on the identity of the lamenter in Psalm 22, and how the entirety of the psalm pictures a special sufferer only adequately captured in a royal messianic figure and ultimately in Jesus the Christ. See Mays, “Prayer and Christology,” 329. Some aspects of the psalm which were apparently not picked up by the Gospel writers, but which subsequently were interpreted in light of Jesus include the piercing of the lamenter’s hands and feet in Psalm 22:16c, which seems an obvious application, unless the “piercing” word was in reality not present in the earliest texts.

²¹ Campbell, “Matthew’s Hermeneutic,” 47–48.

Something further must be said about the cry of dereliction in Psalm 22:1 and Matt 27:46. Many have suggested that the quotation of Psalm 22:1 from the cross is a kind of “shorthand” for identifying the entire psalm.²² Thus, in the first century, everyone would know that quoting the first line of a work was a reference to the entire work, much like referring to “Onward Christian Soldiers,” the opening phrase of the classic hymn, is a way of referencing the whole. In this way, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is a way of referencing the entire psalm, the final third of which is a hymn of praise. In other words, the cry of dereliction from the cross means “suffering, and subsequent glory,” for the whole psalm is in view. It refers, then, to confidence and praise, not to lament at the apparent absence and silence of God.

This interpretation can be open to the challenge that Jesus did not truly enter into the lament and did not truly suffer with us in all our afflictions.²³ Others suggest that to so interpret Psalm 22:1, and its application in Matthew 27, is to damage the meaning of the lament, that God had indeed turned his back on the psalmist, and on Christ, and thus the cry is real. Those who adopt this position may be open to the criticism that God cannot abandon his only son, that it is impossible for the Godhead to be split in this fashion.²⁴

A third alternative is, I think, an attractive one. That it, that Jesus takes up the righteous cry of the sufferer, that he laments in every way as we do.²⁵ He enters into the Pit, he suffers the same persecution from enemies, the same physical distress, the same apparent silence and absence of God, that afflicts the psalmist in Psalm 22. As I mentioned earlier, it does little good to speculate whether God actually is silent and distant; what is the difference to the sufferer whether God *is* distant, or is merely *perceived* as such? We live on the ground, under the sun (Eccl 1:3, 9, 14, etc.), and are often enough

²² Mays, “Prayer and Christology,” 322.

²³ See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 204–205.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 203–204.

²⁵ See in this regard Reumann, “Psalm 22 at the Cross,” 43 and Mays, “Prayer and Christology,” 325. Bauckham, (*Jesus and the God of Israel*, 256, has perhaps the finest discussion of how Jesus gathers into himself and his lament all our laments.

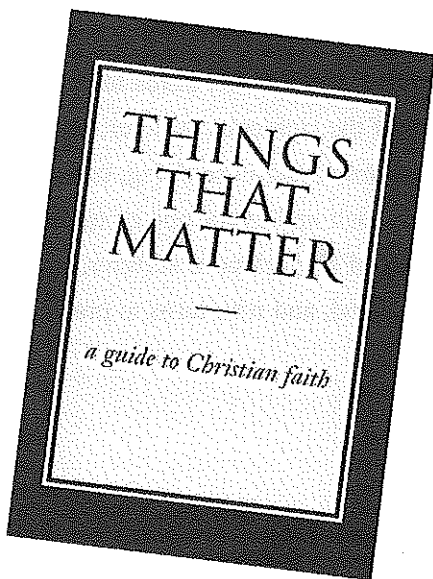
people of the lament. Jesus takes up the paradigmatic prayer of the righteous sufferer, like Job, who cries out to God in his anguish and loss and rails to him about his absence and silence. Job is never chided or condemned for his cries; rather, God commends him in the closing episode (Job 42:8) for speaking about him what was true! Jesus takes on the persona—in fact, becomes the persona—of the righteous sufferer, who cries out in his physical, social, and spiritual distress, and in so doing, calls God the Father his the lament and identifies with each and every one of us in our suffering. Psalm 22 is, then, the ultimate cry of the righteous sufferer, who makes his cry to the Lord, who is answered by God, and who turns to praise and calls the ends of the earth to join in that praise.

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