
PRAYER AND CHRISTOLOGY: PSALM 22 AS PERSPECTIVE ON THE PASSION

BY JAMES L. MAYS

"That Jesus as Son of God uses the prayer and actualizes the identity described in it does something to suffering that changes its face for those who believe in him. . . . Knowing 'he has been through it' does not give us a final explanation or metaphysic. It does give us a new perspective, experience, and stance."

IN THE New Testament, prayer and Christology are inextricably linked. When the Gospels tell the story of the passion of Jesus, prayers are used to weave the fabric of the narrative. Specifically, Psalm 22 is the principal Old Testament resource employed by the evangelists to portray, and so interpret, the climax of Jesus' career.

The facts are these. There are thirteen (perhaps seventeen) Old Testament texts which appear in the passion narrative of the Gospels. Some are quotations, some allusions. Of the thirteen, nine come from the Psalms. Five come from Psalm 22, two from Psalm 69, and one from Psalm 31. All three of the psalms are prayers for help on the part of one who suffers, the kind of psalm usually classified as "the lament of an individual" in generic analysis.

The best known connection between Psalm 22 and the passion narrative is Jesus' cry "Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani," a quotation of the prayer's first sentence (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46). But it is not just the opening words that are involved. Citing the first words of a text was, in the tradition of the time, a way of identifying an entire passage. Moreover, features of the psalm's description of the psalmist's experience appear in the Gospel narrative (verse 7 in Mark 15:29; Matt. 27:39; verse 8 in Matt. 27:43; verse 15 in John 19:28; verse 19 in Mark 15:24; Matt. 27:35; Luke 23:34; and John 15:24). The experiences of the one who prays in the psalm become part of the scenario of the passion. So, the Gospels draw a connection not only between the prayers of Jesus and

James L. Mays is Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. A former editor of the journal *Interpretation*, he is presently General Editor of the *Interpretation* commentary series (John Knox Press). He has himself written commentaries on Hosea, Amos, and Micah.

the psalm, but as well between the person of Jesus and the person portrayed in the self-description of the psalm. In the intellectual world of Judaism, one of the most important ways of understanding the meaning of present experience was to make sense of the contemporary by perceiving and describing it in terms of an established tradition. That seems to be happening in the connection between psalm and passion story.

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 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. It may be that in this way we glimpse something about the Christ and prayer and the relation between the two that might not be clear from other perspectives.

I. GENRE OF THE PSALM

We can begin with the recognition that the psalm is a "prayer for help" and shares many characteristics with these prayers. Its basic purpose appears in petitions to God for deliverance from life-threatening trouble (vv. 11, 19-21). The trouble is described, as in some of these prayers, in terms of three relations: to God, others, and self. God's providential care is missing (vv. 1-2); others reject (vv. 6-8) and attack him (vv. 12-13, 16-18); the needy one experiences the loss of life-power (vv. 14-15). The prayer asserts trust in the Lord (vv. 3-5, 9-10). In place of the usual vow of praise or prospective praise, this psalm concludes with a long hymnic section (vv. 22-31).

Psalm 22 shares words and motifs with other prayers for help as well as structural features. Like the other psalms of its genre, Psalm 22 was composed for liturgical use. What one hears through it is not the voice of a particular historical person at a certain time, but one individual case of the typical. Its language was designed to give individuals a poetic and liturgical location, to provide a prayer that is paradigmatic for particular suffering and needs. To use it was to set oneself in its paradigm.

That is, first of all, what Jesus does in his anguished cry to God when he begins to recite the psalm. He joins the multitudinous company of the afflicted and becomes one with them in their suffering. In praying as they do, he expounds his total identification with them. He gives all his followers who are afflicted permission and encouragement to pray for help. He shows that faith includes holding the worst of life up to God. "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear" (Heb. 5:7).

But to classify Psalm 22 as one of the prayers for help is only a first

step in recognizing the character of this psalm. One senses in simply reading the text a difference, a development of the type that raises it to its very limits and begins to transcend them. There is an intensity and comprehensiveness about the psalm which presses toward the ultimate possibilities that lie in the event sketched in the psalm: an afflicted person appealing in helplessness to God and then praising God for help.

This magnification of the typical event has been noticed by interpreters through the centuries. Calvin saw how largely the psalm outruns any experience in David's life: "From the tenor of the whole composition, it appears that David does not here refer merely to one persecution, but comprehends all the persecutions which he suffered under Saul."¹ And F. Delitzsch agrees that in this psalm "David descends, with his complaint, into a depth that lies beyond the depth of his affliction, and rises, with his hopes, to a height that lies far beyond the height of the reward of his affliction."² There is, of course, the possibility that this feeling about the scope of the psalm is prompted by its association with the death of Jesus. Yet when the psalm is carefully examined in the context of other prayers for help, it becomes clear that the intensity and comprehensiveness is a fact of the psalm's composition; it is there in the text itself.

II. STRUCTURE OF THE PSALM

The psalm is composed by using the device of repetition or doubling.³ There is a twice-ness in the arrangement from the opening vocative to the total structure itself. The whole is composed of a full-scale prayer for help (verses 1-21) and a full-scale psalm of praise for help (verses 22-31). In the Book of Psalms, these two types and the acts they express are represented by distinct songs, as would be expected from the different situations which gave rise to them. But here the two are joined in a unity, as though the two acts of prayer and praise and the two situations of affliction and salvation must be comprehended in one arc of meaning to express what is happening.

The prayer moves through two cycles (vv. 1-11 and 12-21), each concluding in the petition, "be not far" (vv. 11, 19). Both of the cycles are composed of a twofold alternation of elements. The first cycle is made up of two laments over the psalmist's trouble (vv. 1-2 and 6-8), each followed by appropriately corresponding assertions of confidence in God (vv. 3-5 and 9-12). The second cycle is made up also of two laments (vv. 12-15 and 16-18), each composed of a description of surrounding bestial forces (vv. 12-13 and 16), followed by descriptions of the nearness of encroaching death (vv. 14-15 and 17-18). The second petition (vv. 19-21) intensifies the first (v. 11) by threefold repetitions.

The song of praise is also composed of two sections (vv. 22-26 and 27-31). The first section is a hymn in first person style whose focus is on

¹John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*. Vol. I. (Edinburgh, 1845), p. 357.

²F. Delitzsch, *Psalms*. Vol. I. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1980), p. 306.

³See the analysis of structure in H. Gese, "Psalm 22 und das Neue Testament," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 65 (April, 1968), pp. 6 ff.

the congregation that celebrates with the psalmist his deliverance and is made up of summons to praise (vv. 22–23) and the subject or reason for praise (vv. 24–26). The second section widens the circle of praise from congregation to humanity itself, all nations (v. 27), the strong and dying (v. 29), and even people yet unborn (vv. 30–31). Verse 28 and the concluding clause of verse 31 mark the twofold arrangement of this hymn.

To hear or read the psalm is to be confronted with a testimony that comprehends the absence and the action of God in a configuration of affliction unto death and salvation to life. The figure whose prayer and praise is heard undergoes a reversal of relations: before, mocked and rejected because of his dependence on God; after, joined by a company who celebrate with him because of it; before, surrounded by forces of evil whose threat replaces the present power of God; after, the occasion for the universal eternal celebration of the sovereignty of God.

What happens in this psalm is in its basic plot a case of the experience through which the believing Israelite passed in praying in tribulation, using prayers for help and then later praising God with a company of friends when delivered. Here the two are joined, intensified and magnified in a scenario that identifies the combination as the way in which God's universal external reign is manifested and disclosed.

III. THE "IDENTITY" IN THE PSALM

In this finely-wrought compositional design, each of the four parts (the two of the prayer and the two of praise) makes an important contribution to the identity of the figure who is known only through the poetic liturgical typical language of the psalm. Again, he comes through as generic, one of the faithful in trouble who cries out to God, one of a multitude for whom the prayers for help were written. But the figure also comes through as a special case of the type. Each of the parts builds up this prototypical identity in typical and particular ways.

Verses 1–11. The first part is as a whole an elaboration of the opening cry, an exposition of the misery and mystery contained in "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" What it means to say "my God" comes clear in verses 3–5 and verses 9–12. Having God as "my God" rests first of all on belonging to a community for whom the center of all reality is "the holy one" who is enthroned as king in heavenly and earthly temple (see Psalm 99) and whose acts of salvation are the content of Israel's hymns of praise. It is to share the meaning and tradition of "our fathers" who in times of trouble trusted and cried and were delivered; it is to believe that experience is the truth about God for me. It is important for the identity of this figure that the kingdom of God and the corporate context are so quickly established as features of his situation; in reverse order they will be the themes of the praise which describe the significance of his salvation.

Saying "my God" is based as well on quite personal experience. This

individual relationship is described by use of a metaphor portraying God in the role of a human father who takes the child as it comes from the womb, lays it on its mother's breast to nurse, and thereafter furnishes the environment of provision and security in which life is lived. It is the testimony of a whole life lived in dependence on God. Notice that in declaring his right to say "my God," the figure speaks neither of his own acts or character or status, but only of God and what God has done.

And therein lies the pain. His statements about God are confessions of faith, of confidence in God. But in the prayer they serve also as complaints, as panels of contrast to the figure's present situation. The fathers cried out and were saved, but he cries day and night with no answer (v. 2). All his life has been an experience of the "delight" of the Lord, but now he has lost the value of a person in the eyes of others who scorn him in his troubles and mock him with his dependence on his God (vv. 9-10).

Psalm 37 is the commentary here. The figure in both psalms is a person who has committed his way to the Lord (v. 5) and the established course of his life has been a sign of the delight of the Lord (v. 23), but the promises to those who trust the Lord are not being kept for him (*passim*). God's way in salvation history with God's people and in providence with the saints is not working in the life of this figure. God is his central problem, the focus of his pain. The alternation in the psalm between descriptions of trouble and statements about God's way expresses the contradiction that rends the soul when the unity of faith and experience is broken. The figure can speak of that rupture theologically only as forsakenness, as the distance of God.

Verses 12-21. The second part of the psalm develops the theme, "trouble is near," which is heard at the end of the first (v. 11). Using the motif "surrounds" (vv. 12, 16), the psalm describes what is "near" to fill the space left vacant by the "farness" of God. The figure is identified as a person surrounded and being done to death by a company of evildoers, a social group whose unity lies in their common consent to evil.

Animal metaphors are used to convey the viciousness and danger. (The extended metaphor is unique in the Psalms; the simile "like a lion" is used to characterize foes in Ps. 7:2 and Ps. 10:9f.) Lion and ox are conventional pairs to represent the epitome of power. Hounds and hunters (vv. 16, 20) evoke the helpless prey. The identity of these evildoers is hidden behind the animal masks they wear. Perhaps the metaphors give these enemies a demonic cast; in the ancient Near Eastern religions, demons and divine figures often appear as animals. The metaphors render them as bestial, powerful, dramatizing intensely the mortal overwhelming plight of the figure.

In alternation with the lament over the evildoers, the figure describes his own condition in two panels whose common point is the approach of death; its signs are in his body (vv. 14-18) and its expectation in those who watch him (vv. 17-18). Paradoxically, he experiences the activity of

his distant God in his descent into the realm of death (v. 15); God's sovereign power is mysteriously mingled with the forces that drive him from the sphere of the living. The unusually extended petition in vv. 19–20 concludes the prayer. Verse 19 repeats the thematic petition for God to end his absence and pleads for deliverance from the surrounding powers, listing them in reverse order—hunters, hounds, lion, and ox (vv. 20–21).

The effect of the whole is to create a shifting montage of images evoking violence and dying that never comes into focus so that the horror could be identified and confined to some specific kind of suffering. Instead, one is given the impression of the terror of cosmic anarchy brought to bear on one figure, a vision of what happens when evil breaks through the normal restraints of humanity because the restraining, correcting salvation and providence of God are absent.

There are two places in the text of this part of the psalm where uncertainties have played important roles in its interpretation and so need to be noted. The last clause of v. 16 in the Masoretic text reads "like a lion my hands and feet," which the Jewish Publication Society translation (JPS) follows in translating, "like lions [they maul] my hands and feet," making the clause a continuation of the hunting image of the previous two clauses. RSV follows the Septuagint in rendering, "They have pierced my hands and feet," a reading which early Christian interpreters connected with the crucifixion of Jesus. The fact that this reading is not reflected in the Gospel's use of the psalm may mean that it was unknown to those who formed the tradition of the passion of Jesus. The second place is a puzzling affixed verb at the end of v. 21 which would normally mean "you (have) answer(ed) me." Again, RSV follows the Septuagint with "my afflicted (soul)," which the context supports. Others find in the Hebrew text a liturgical signal that an oracle of salvation intervenes between vv. 21 and 22. Neither of these problems is subject to any certain solution.

Verses 22–26. With its third part, the psalm moves from prayer for help to praise for help, from one genre to another. The setting assumed by the language now is the service of the *todah* in which a person whose prayer for deliverance has been answered goes to the sanctuary with those who rejoice at his restoration, does what is necessary to keep the vows made in the prayer for help, and provides a sacrificial meal for the company of family and friends who are with him, and sings a song of praise and thanksgiving for salvation. What we hear in vv. 22–26 is the song, whose references to the service and its rituals are transparent (see especially Psalms 34 and 118). Now all has changed for the figure. Instead of forsakenness, an answer to his cry (v. 24); instead of the scorn of his fellows and the threat of evildoers, he is surrounded now by a company of brothers in praise and faith; instead of laments at the encroachment of death, he can offer his brothers a wish for enduring life (v. 26).

As we listen to the hymn, we learn two things about the figure. First, the group who celebrate his deliverance with him have a theological spiritual identity. They are not simply family, friends, and neighbors, a company constituted by natural and accidental relations. They are brothers (v. 22) in a religious sense. All the different designations refer to this fraternal company: "fearers of the Lord" (vv. 23, 25), "seekers of the Lord" (v. 26), "the lowly" (Hebrew *'ānāwīm*, RSV "afflicted" or "poor," v. 26), "descendants of Jacob/Israel" (v. 24). This last designation does not mean that Israel as a nation is the lowly, but rather that the lowly, seekers, fearers are the true Israel, the real congregation who live by the praise of the Lord.

The language of the hymn reflects a group who without separating themselves from the national society in a social way are thinking and speaking about themselves and their relation to God in a way that is beginning to redefine what it means to be Israel. They are the people who in an intentional and public manner "commit their way to the Lord," the stance for which the figure was scorned and mocked (vv. 7-8). The figure is by self-understanding and confession one of the lowly, an *'ānī*. It is not his affliction that has made him a lowly one, but rather he has undergone his affliction as one of the lowly.

This leads to the second thing that is learned about the figure. His deliverance is an event that exemplifies and demonstrates the profoundest faith of the group. The Lord does not despise the affliction of the lowly, but hears his cry for help (v. 24; see the similar declaration in Ps. 69:33 and Ps. 102:7; Psalms 9/10 and 34 develop the theme at length). People despise the lowly in his affliction. They take his affliction as a reason to scorn dependence on the Lord (vv. 6-8). But the Lord makes the affliction an occasion for giving a signal that it is the lowly in whom he delights. So the company of brothers in faith celebrate not only the salvation of the figure, but the good news for them in his deliverance. The satisfaction they find in the *todah* meal is far more than physical; it nourishes their spirit. (Note the connections with Isa. 55:1ff.) The salvation of the figure is the ground for faith for all the lowly.

Verses 27-31. The fourth part connects the fate of this afflicted one with the future of the kingdom of the Lord. The significance of his salvation is now proclaimed for the entire world and its many families of peoples (v. 27), for all conditions of human existence from the "vigorous" (so JPS, RSV "proud") to the dying (v. 29), for future generations yet unborn (vv. 30-31). Everyone—everywhere, of every condition, in every time—will join in the worship of those who recognize and rejoice that universal sovereignty belongs to the Lord. This will all take place through the proclamation of the salvation of the afflicted one as the righteousness (v. 31 *šēdāqâ*, RSV "deliverance") of God. That deed of righteousness will become the basis and content of the nations' worship; they will "remember," that is, evoke an event of the past as the significant reality of the present. This last panel of the psalm identifies

the figure as the one whose suffering and salvation is proclaimed to the world as a call to repent (notice *šûb* in v. 27, RSV, "turn") and believe in the kingdom of God, the dominion of the Lord.

That even the dying are caught up in the response of worship is a surprise. In the thought world of the psalm, the dead do not praise the Lord. Verse 29 does not seem to include those already dead (the Hebrew text is quite difficult to read at the end of the verse and the beginning of verse 30). Yet to praise the Lord in the throes of death means that some profound change has taken place because of the salvation of the afflicted one that brings dying itself within the sphere of the Lord's reign. The reach of the Lord's righteousness is pressing on the limits of Israel's view of the possible.

The vision of this hymn is prophetic in character and eschatological in scope. Its place at the conclusion of Psalm 22 connects a vision of the universal, comprehensive, everlasting kingdom of God to what the Lord has wrought in the life of this afflicted one whose prayer and praise the psalm expresses. The connection shortens the question about the identity portrayed in the psalm, and the question is not so much about particular historical or cultic identity as a theological one.

In the Old Testament, God deals with the nations through the corporate entity of God's people. The only individual *through whose person* God deals with the nation is the Davidic king, the messiah, the Son of God, and, one must add, the unidentified servant of the "songs" in Isa. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; and 52:13-53:12. Psalm 22 cannot be the prayer and praise of just any afflicted Israelite. Though we cannot know for certain for whom it was written and through what revisions it may have passed in the history of its use, in its present form the figure in the psalm shares in the corporate vocation of Israel and the messianic role of David.

IV. IMPLICATIONS

(1) The use of the psalm in the New Testament and in the liturgy of Holy Week gives hermeneutical directions about the way believers are to understand it. We are given a role in the scenario of the psalm. We do not identify, either as individual or community, with the person who prays and praises as in the use of many other psalms. That role is claimed for and explicated by Jesus alone. We are rather the congregation on Passion Sunday and Good Friday who listen to the psalm as hearing the words of our Lord and strain to understand what his performance of this psalm means. And the psalm points us to the places and roles in which it is possible to understand—as the table fellowship gathered by the celebration of his eucharist (rendering of thanks) and as the people, whether vigorous or dying, who have the gospel of the kingdom of God preached to them. Heard from these places and roles, the psalm may bring us a new and renewed realization of what his performance of the psalm means for him and us.

(2) That Jesus as Son of God uses the prayer and actualizes the identity described in it does something to suffering that changes its face for those who believe in him. Suffering becomes something he has been through at its typical worst. The change is not something empirical, but experiential. We can grasp the dimensions of the change if we could imagine ourselves thinking of suffering only as something from which God is absent or which God inflicts on people. Knowing "he has been through it" does not give us a final explanation or metaphysic. It does give us a new perspective, experience, and stance.

(3) The psalm combines prayer and praise, language of suffering and celebration, in one arc of unity so as to say the one is not to be understood apart from the other. The possibilities in this dying are not seen apart from the celebration, and the celebration has its basis and cause in the identity and conduct of the dying one. The psalm as a unit reminds us that neither in faith nor liturgy are the moments of the passion story and Holy Week to be isolated. The periods are rather perspectives from which to view the whole. The mystery and meaning is that it is the living Lord who tells of his dying and it is the crucified one who lives.

(4) In its unity, the psalm provides a scenario for reflection on the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection that is different from the traditional models of sacrifice, trial, and combat.

The psalm interprets Jesus' passion and resurrection as a theodicy for those who commit their way to the Lord. The Gospel accounts make it very clear that he suffered and died as one of the "lowly." In the psalm, it is the dying of one who trusts in the Lord that raises the question about God, and it is his salvation that leads to the knowledge that God "has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted" (a very real possibility to Old Testament people and to moderns). Jesus' enactment of the scenario includes the affliction to death, and is ground for knowledge that whatever the anguish caused by the conflict of faith and experience may mean, it does not mean that God has failed those who cry to him. For the lowly, the passion and resurrection of Jesus is a justification of God in whom they trust and a vindication of their trust.

The psalm interprets Jesus' passion and resurrection as a summons to the world (in the most inclusive sense of that term) to believe in the reign of the Lord. In the psalm, all the people of every nation, condition, and time are expected to turn to the Lord in praise because God has acted to deliver the dying afflicted one. How the psalmist understood that expectation is not clear. The Second Isaiah proclaimed that the Lord's deliverance of the exiled dying Israel would be a revelation of the Lord's reign to all the nations. In the psalm, dying is portrayed as the experience of a threefold loss: of vitality, of social support, and of God. It was clear that where death set the final seal on that threefold experience for those who identified themselves with the Lord, a line was drawn against God's sovereignty. Life and its loss is what binds all people in

every nation, culture, and time. All face and finally experience the threefold loss: of physical vitality, of the possibility that family and friends can sustain and relieve, of a conscious relation to the cosmic power that creates and maintains existence. In the passion of Jesus, that threefold loss is undergone and he dies. But his resurrection is the signal to all who dread and undergo the threefold loss that death itself has been brought within the rule of the God of Jesus Messiah. It is the news that is of ultimate concern for all humanity.

(5) The psalm suggests that we think of the Lord's Supper as a *todah* of the *'ānāwīm*. It is the *eucharist* instituted and defined by a lowly one and shared by the lowly. This raises a question about the self-understanding we bring to the Lord's table, whether we come as one of the lowly. The term refers to those who conduct life in dependence on God. It is an identity constituted by a personal stance of mind and will toward the "world." It is not defined economically or ritually or institutionally. Its features may be seen in Jesus' human life: a centering on God, prayer, gratitude, obedience, empathy, and patience with others. The beatitudes are relevant here, and the psalm reveals that they are instruction to us about our identity in coming to the table of the Lord.