

Expository Articles

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Psalm 22

THE USE of this psalm on Good Friday produces two tensions that are productive for preaching. On the one hand, the form and tone of the psalm is that of the prayer of a believer who is beset by illness, whereas the episodes of faith depicted in the psalm are clearly archetypal and expressive of the worship of Israel. On the other hand, the use that the suffering Jesus makes of this psalm wrenches it out of its setting as lament and places it squarely into the realm of the kerygmatic. The contradictory surges of this private lament actually gather up the many aspects of the faithful suffering of believers as well as the saving suffering of our Lord.

The vigorous charge of neglect that the psalmist levels against God offends modern sensibilities, even the sensibilities of faith. The psalmist's illness is corporeal because the fever burns hot enough to turn flesh into water, or hot enough to melt the sinew binding bone to bone, or hot enough to cement tongue and mouth together. The psalmist's illness is mortal, headed for dusty death. The psalmist's illness also has a spiritual dimension for just when this believer needs God more than ever before, God is absent, utterly hidden behind the very circumstances that warrant the divine presence. Night and day the cry of the sufferer goes up to God, and day upon day passes without any sign of celestial assistance. All this is apt to sound strange to modern hearers. Perhaps the linguistic conjunction of illness and God will raise the specter of causality, as though the psalmist is blaming God for having laid his dreadful, physical condition directly on him. Causal language truly does not suit faith, for it posits God as a capricious manipulator who has a dark side that might not always be for us. However, our psalmist posits God as one who wants health and rest for all people but who is hidden behind a follower's melting heart and dried-up tongue. The psalm's simple and passionate testimony to the reality of God is arresting enough in these times, but to assert that God is sometimes hidden behind a difficult circumstance challenges the shape and nature of faith itself.

Whereas the language of causality is rightly alien to faith, it is nevertheless common for Christians to suppose that the presence of a loving God means health and wholeness rather than bones that are out of joint and strength that lies helpless and bleached, like a potsherd along a path. A modern person might well ask what God is good for anyway if it is not to

prevent trouble. Yet, it is clear to our psalmist that because there are forces aplenty that will only eventually be completely tamed by the creator—forces that can cause us illness, shame, or even worse—the hidden presence of God is actually God's way of being with us when we are beset by difficulty.

I

The first twenty-one verses of this psalm can be divided between those sections having to do with the psalmist's illness and God's absence and those having to do with the memory of God's faithful presence. In verses 6–8, the psalmist describes a life made so grave by his illness that it is as though his God-given upright posture—whereby people might be distinguished as the crown of the creation—has collapsed into the posture of a worm, a posture that puts our God-fearing sufferer smack-dab into the precincts of the tempter. A confession of God's hidden presence is typical of faith, but it is naïve to forget that such a confession is particularly susceptible to doubt.

When one's stature sinks below that of one's peers, there is a social result more terrible than any private pain, the result of being set apart and mocked by others. The carrion instinct, which we so much abhor in certain base creatures, is never far from any of us, and we see it clearly in the mouthy mockers who stand gaping at our sick believer. Their mocking includes the testing of the psalmist's faith, for they commend him to the God whom they assume to have been disproven by the misery that they see and smell. Little wonder that right in that realm, where worms and serpents live, the mockers tempt the psalmist at the point of asking for all that he had left, his faith.

Verses 12–13 make it clear that our hapless psalmist is by no means merely the victim of a misguided inner life, but is beset from without by furious forces that resemble the bulls of Bashan whose open mouths take on the prospect of a ravaging, roaring lion. Do these bulls represent enemies, perhaps even notable people, who both scoff and threaten faith? In any event, the psalmist's illness, wherein God's presence is obscured, is part of a dimension far beyond that of germs or despair, part of the dimension of the demonic.

Verses 16–18 describe a situation that cannot get worse. A company of evildoers, soothing their own misery at the prospect of another's greater pain, bustle about our sick believer like a pack of wild dogs. They stare at this miserable object, which they can barely imagine to have once been human, gloat at their own relative good fortune, strip our psalmist of his clothes, and seal their comfort by casting lots for them. All human dignity is stripped from the psalmist, and only the most callous unbeliever could deny that now our subject, who lies naked and shivering, not only seems to be but is in fact Godforsaken.

What is amazing is that the psalmist yet believes. His belief is fixed on the keen memory—memory that was formed in Israel's worship—of certain

archetypical times when God was clearly and benevolently present. These memories do not function to help the believer forget the terrible circumstances of his illness, but they do help to convince him that God is not absent but, like the sun, is hidden behind a dark, feverish cloud. Faith does not demand denial but allows full perception of all of the circumstances of life.

Our miserable petitioner is able to remember (vs. 3-5) that God is praised in the worship of Israel precisely because he is a God who delivered the nation from its trouble. More than once, God had come out from celestial mystery to establish Israel, not merely with spiritual blessings but with historic deliverance. Certainly God would not do less for our psalmist. The God who is remembered in Israel's worship as having spared Israel again and again has proven to be one who, even in hiddenness, is for God's own.

Israel's worship included archetypical experiences of a personal as well as a national sort. In verses 9-11 the psalmist reflects on his misery against the faithful certainty that God had drawn him from his mother's womb, fed him on his mother's breasts, and been the subject of the psalmist's faith ever since. The placement of verses 3-5 earlier than these verses indicates that the psalmist's private experience of faith could be interpreted only in terms of the larger confession of Israel. Nevertheless, faith has a highly personal dimension, not unlike the refuge that troubled Christians have taken in the guarantee of their baptism. Reflection upon private blessing as well as national deliverance preserves the psalmist from imagining that his misery was hopeless and, instead, gives faithful vitality to his cry for speedy deliverance. Faith knows that on this side of heaven we cannot expect only good from God, and never bad.

The liturgical dialectic created by personal, faithful misery set against the background of God's saving actions culminates in verses 19-21. Here, the passionate request for deliverance from verses 1-2 is heightened by the inclusion of elements from previous petitions; dogs and lions appear again, a fitting liturgical testimony to the deep urgency in faith to preserve life and to stay in touch with its hidden subject.

II

Verse 21 marks the end of that section of Psalm 22 most often assigned for Good Friday. One can understand why it is so. Verses 22-31 are so filled with confident praise to God for having acted on behalf of the suffering believer that it seems to rob the lament of its authenticity and Good Friday of its solemnity. Suddenly the psalmist is singing praises to God in the congregation, or calling all of Israel to praise God for not having despised the afflicted, or confidently asserting that all the families of the earth shall one day worship before Israel's benefactor. Even those who go down to death shall make their dusty testimony of praise. Suddenly all is well, and the stuck tongue of our miserable believer has joined in a mighty chorus of the saints.

This radical change in the psalm's tone forces questions to mind. Are there two psalms here, each to be treated separately? Are we to suppose that verses 22–31 are primarily hopeful in the face of tragedy, or do they reflect a deliverance already accomplished? Are these verses of praise inappropriate for Good Friday? Some of these questions can be answered by the character of this psalm as worship, but others can best be answered by our inescapable knowledge that Jesus used certain words of this psalm at the cross.

Here we have the various experiences of faith compressed and made archetypal. Private lament in the face of God's hiddenness is caught up in a faithful, corporate cry to God for help. Faithful divine action on behalf of God's own is likewise caught up in praise as it spreads throughout the world. This psalm is a prayer that expresses the full range of faith, and its discontinuity typifies not the capriciousness of God but God's saving graciousness as over against the stunning variety of our own lives. The distinct parts of the psalm stand as necessary components of faith.

Christians cannot read this psalm without remembering that it is frequently quoted in New Testament accounts of Jesus' passion. Verse 1 appears in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34, verse 7 in Matthew 27:39 and Mark 15:29, verse 8 in Matthew 27:43, verse 15 in John 19:28, and verse 18 in Matthew 27:35 and John 19:23–24. Around this usage—especially the so-called cry of dereliction from verse 1—swirl additional questions, all the way from whether or not this is a messianic psalm to various questions about how we are to understand the death of Jesus. We should be clear about two things, however, from the outset. First, the Godforsakenness of Jesus cannot be taken to be a charade of helpful metaphor but must be taken absolutely seriously. The depth of the forsakenness of the psalmist serves as a proper background for the depth of the experience of the cross. Second, by making the connection between the anguish of Psalm 22 and the words of the suffering Jesus, Christians increase their awareness of the sin by which all people are bound and the correlative length to which God has gone for the sake of our rescue.

The Messiah as future King of Salvation is not directly prefigured in this psalm. However, Jesus' use of the psalm denotes a substantive connection between the Godforsakenness of our beleaguered psalmist and what happened at Calvary. There, in addition to the identification of Jesus with all suffering through the suffering of the psalmist—so that there is never a moment of suffering when Jesus is not with us as one who understands—God placed upon our forsaken Lord the unfathomable burden of the sin of the world. As Psalm 22 had gathered up the life of Israel into worship, so do the words of that psalm proclaim to us that it is our own separation from God, from others, and from ourselves that was gathered to Jesus at the cross, gathered to the cross and born into the light of freedom and forgiveness at the open tomb. Christian use of Psalm 22 belongs most properly to Good Friday, but this magnificent psalm leans perceptibly toward Easter.



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