

We Are Not Forsaken Meditation on Psalm 22

From the point of view of biblical theology, Psalm 22 is a critical text. In its Old Testament setting it is a classical expression of the plaintive cry of the righteous sufferer for vindication.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

I cry by day, but you do not answer.

All who see me mock at me, open wide their mouth in derision and wag their heads.

Well, you get the general drift of things. And yet what is fascinating about this psalm is that in the course of the psalm the cries of woe end abruptly and it takes a different direction. The psalm falls into two parts. The first part (1-21) is this terrible lament of the righteous sufferer. But, often overlooked, we have the closing section (22-31), which is a psalm of thanksgiving.

For he (i.e. God) has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; and he has not hid his face from him, but has heard, when he (i.e. the afflicted) cried to him.

We could stop and linger over what had happened to cause this tremendous change in outlook between the beginning and ending of the psalm. Some, a minority, have even wondered whether someone welded two distinct psalms together. But, that is not where we wish to camp out.

As most of you know, Psalm 22 also plays a critical role in the New Testament. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it structures the accounts of the death of our Lord in Matthew and Mark. In so doing, it plays a role in setting forth the Christian story that is almost breathtaking in scope – certainly worth noting for a modest homily.

The gospel writers are aware of a fundamental question. If Jesus was the Son of God, how come he proved helpless against the Romans? Mel Gibson, if he has done anything, has certainly made that point. To those who pigeonhole the Psalter simply as the hymnbook of ancient Hebrew piety, the answer of the Gospels is stunning: Jesus' death had to be this way because scripture (Psalm 22) had foreshadowed or predicted it.

Many of you in this room know that I love to quote Irenaeus' description of a theologian. I paraphrase it as, "one who takes the small pieces of scripture and puts them together correctly in a mosaic to make the big picture of Christ as King." Psalm 22 is a key piece in that picture. It tells us both about the righteous sufferer who first was forsaken but then was vindicated. So it was with Jesus. At the cross, the mockers had a field day. Abandoned by the disciples, mocked by the soldiers, bystanders and bandits, Jesus expresses his despair in the words of Psalm 22:1, "My god, my God why have you forsaken me?" They scorn his claim to be the Son of God,

ridiculing the notion that Yahweh comes to his aid as he suffers; and thus, again, his death fulfills other portions of the psalm (Psalm 22:7-8).

But for the gospel writers, Jesus' mockery and ridicule is not where matters end – again, just like Psalm 22. At Jesus' death things begin to happen. In Matthew's account, people come out of the tombs. The Gentile soldiers standing around in awe confess him as the Son of God. In Psalm 22:27-28 we hear that the families of nations bow before the Lord and this extends even to those who sleep in the earth. Matthew considers that the course of Jesus' life culminating in resurrection embodied the truth of Psalm 22.

Some months ago, my wife and I went to a funeral home to visit with the bereaving family of a dear Christian man who had passed away. At the time there were few around, but over to one side was the grieving mother. As we went over to greet her, she spoke. It will be awhile before I forget her plaintive word, "This isn't supposed to happen. I am the mother – my son should have outlived me."

Yes, many things occur that are not "supposed to happen." How many of you – a few years ago would have thought that you would be taking courses of study in a theological college or seminary today. But here we are. And the word for the morning is this is not inexplicable. It is not some strange twist of fate. There is purpose in life.

Centuries after Psalm 22 was composed, in the context of the full story, people of faith could see its real point. Thus with our journey. Some day we will see the point of this course of study. Then, in the words of the last verse of this psalm, we will be able to say, "The Lord has wrought it" (Psalm 21:31).

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