

The Quotations Bible Study: Series I: The Person of Jesus

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Week 7. The Atonement: Jesus on the Cross

Prayer: Father, as we approach the mystery of your grace, lead us by the clear light of your Spirit to the truth about Jesus' sacrifice and your plan for our salvation, in Jesus' Name, amen.

We have now come to the final installment in this series and the heart of the subject. Psalm 22 is connected to Jesus on the Cross in many remarkable ways. Jesus became the sacrifice for the sins of the world, hanging on the Cross, and as He did so, the opening words of Psalm 22 were on His lips.

The title of this study is *The Atonement...*, but it is not about the theology of the Atonement, or the Atonement as a doctrine. Rather, its focus is on how the Atonement came about, how it was lived, what it meant to the One who was the sacrifice.

In the brief study before us (for there have been whole books written about this), we will ask what the words He spoke at the end mean and why Jesus uttered them in His extremity. The starting point for this inquiry is Psalm 22 itself.

I. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Focus passages:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?—Psalm 22:1

They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.—Psalm 22:18

Background: Psalm 22

It would be hard to think of a more heart-rending cry in Scripture than the exclamation that opens Psalm 22. The psalm's author was David, and it is the first of three consecutive psalms that Scofield identified as a set, with 23 and 24, and denoted as Messianic. As with other psalms we have examined, it is not clear that this psalm was recognized as Messianic before the time of Jesus (though afterwards, this understanding was and remains irresistible). Even more mysteriously, we know of no time in the life of David when he was subjected to the kind of physical distress that the psalm alludes to. So, from the very beginning, we have some questions about the origins and intent of this psalm that, seemingly, only divine revelation can answer.

[Enrichment: I use the name “David” in the following because the psalm is ascribed to David by the very old, but not necessarily original, psalm title. In previous psalm studies the ascription was missing or ascribed to someone else, in which case I used the term, “Psalmist.” The two terms are not mutually exclusive. Those psalms ascribed to David were probably written by him, and those ascribed to others were probably not written by David, but neither is necessarily so. It is not clear that any of the psalms are autobiographical in any strict sense, and in most of the psalms, this element is completely lacking. Thus, we do not see the authorship as a significant question, because we view the psalms as having been inspired by the Holy Spirit, whoever's hand held the pen, just as Jesus did. (Mark 12:36)]

Let us look at the text and answer a few questions. David begins with some statements that reflect something close to despair.

Q1: What is David's basic complaint? (Ps. 22:1,2)

Q2: What reassurance occurs to David? (Ps. 22:3-5)

David now sets forth some details about his present unusually bad situation.

Q3: What does he mean by “I am a worm and not a man”? (Ps. 22:6)

Quotations Bible Study—Series 1, Week 7, The Atonement

- Q4:** How do other people look on David? (Ps. 22:6,7)
Q5: How is reliance on God rewarded by society? (Ps. 22:8)
Q6: What is David's bedrock of assurance? (Ps. 22:9,10)
Q7: In comparison to his relationship to God when he was young, how does David see his current situation and resources? (Hint: the bulls of Bashan were legendary for their size and strength due to their generous feeding on the lush vegetation of Bashan, now known as the Golan Heights.) (Ps. 22:11-13)
Q8: Is the threat immediate? (Ps. 22:12-13)

Not only have the threats become apparent, but they have had an effect.

- Q9:** What faculties have failed David in this extremity? (Ps. 22:14,15)
Q10: Whose hand does David see as having brought him to the brink of death? (Ps. 22:15)
Q11: How are the "dogs" and the "band of evil men" related? (Ps. 22:16)
Q12: What is David's appearance, and how do people react to it? (Ps. 22:17)
Q13: Why would anyone be dividing David's clothes or gambling for them? (Ps. 22:18)
Q14: Do we understand the urgency of David's cry for help now? (Ps. 22:19-21)

In confidence that the prayer will be answered, David now turns to praise for the LORD and some predictions about how the situation will come out.

- Q15:** In contrast to the public spectacle of Ps. 22:6-8, David is now prepared to render public praise. What will he do? (Ps. 22:22,23)
Q16: What confidence can Israel have during affliction? (Ps. 22:24)
Q17: Whom does David look to in affliction? (Ps. 22:25)
Q18: Whom does the LORD's provision extend to? (Ps. 22:26,27)
Q19: What is the LORD's position? (Ps. 22:28)
Q20: What parties will join in the praise and thanksgiving? (Hint: the dust is the dust of poverty but may also be the dust of death, as in v.15.) (Ps. 22:29)
Q21: What does "those who cannot keep themselves alive" suggest? (Ps. 22:29)
Q22: How does God's service proceed through the ages? (Ps. 22:30)
Q23: Whom is David speaking about when he says "a people yet unborn"? (Ps. 22:31)
Q24: "He has done it." What has the LORD done? (Ps. 22:31)

This brief survey of the entire Psalm 22 raises as many questions as it answers. Psalm 22 never mentions atonement or redemption, yet both are strongly intimated. What is this vision that David is having, if it not from his own direct experience? To put these questions into perspective, let us take a moment to consider some observations about the Psalms in general.

[Enrichment: Some thoughts on the Psalms

The Psalms are often taught as devotions, probably because most people think of them that way, full of wisdom and piety as they are. There is good reason to think that they are much more than that. The New Testament writers made extensive use of the Psalms. But what do the Psalms teach? The Psalms have no story, outline no doctrine, differ widely among themselves, were ascribed to different people, and were written over a broad range of time. Nevertheless, they are instructive and impart much wisdom, without being at all like the Proverbs. How? We need some answers to these questions, answers we can apply to our understanding of Psalm 22.

A. What are the Psalms?

The Psalms are a collection of 150 Hebrew poems, assembled in five collections or books, as shown below:

- book I, psalms 1-41
- book II, psalms 42-72
- book III, psalms 73-89
- book IV, psalms 90-106

- book V, psalms 107-150

While the progression of books may represent decreasing age or different periods in the history of Israel, there is no known predecessor showing the collection of psalms through Psalm 89 in any other order, grouping, or selection. But the Dead Sea Scrolls show the assembly of psalms following Psalm 90 in a variety of different orders and content. Thus the latter part of the canon of Psalms may have been in a state of flux as late as 100-200 B.C., though this cannot be known for certain. The Septuagint (third century B.C.) has all 150 psalms just as we have them, though divided slightly differently.

The titles or superscriptions for the Psalms are not thought to be original. No one is certain how old they are, but those in the Septuagint are markedly different. Nevertheless, they are important evidence as to authorship and intent, where they apply. There is a respected body of opinion that holds the psalm titles to be part of the inspired text, added by the original compilers of the psalm collections, which implies that the ascriptions are authoritative. And, among the psalms themselves, there may also be connections between individual psalms that are not apparent in the text we have; these are conjectures based on interior evidence.

B. The Psalms as literature

As poetical literature, the Psalms are deliberate works of art. Of course, all the Scriptures are artful, so much so, that the Scriptures have determined to a great extent what shall be thought artful in Western culture. But the Psalms, and the other poetry of the Bible, have art as part of their purpose and intent. As poetry is different from prose, so the Psalms are different from the non-poetical parts of the Bible. It is significant that after the Psalms, both sequentially and historically, most of the books of the Old Testament, consisting primarily in the prophets, major and minor, are filled with poetry. Some of the shorter books, like Micah, Nahum, and Obadiah, are entirely poetical in form.

The Psalms provide the poetical paradigm of the Bible. Here the Psalmist slips from praise narrative to declarative to imperative to mystical image and back again with the ease of the most skilled navigator negotiating a torrent. For that is what underlies the Psalms—a torrent of praises, emotions, rages, griefs, hopes, assurances, resolutions, confidences, commands, condemnations, judgments, triumphs, humiliations, failures, and glories, all boiling up into a magnificent body of poetry that we call Psalms (after the Septuagint, the Greek word *psalmos* meaning “song,” with the implication that they be accompanied by string instruments) but the Jews called simply *t’hillim* or praises.

C. The Psalms as songs

In that sense, the translators of the Septuagint got it right: the Psalms are more than poetry—they are songs. Many were included as regular components of the Jewish feasts as hymns to be sung at certain scripted times. Jesus undoubtedly sang such hymns. (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26) Probably, they were all sung at one time or another. What is certain is that they were all meant for presentation at communal events, whatever form that presentation took, whether singing or reading or choral recitation or dramatic performance. The hints of antiphonal formation, or leader/chorus structure, or dramatic parts, are too numerous and suggestive to ignore.

In the second study in this series, we remarked how the primary poetic vehicle in Hebrew poetry, namely, parallelism and imitation, is one that survives translation, unlike rhyming and meter. It is, I think, much more than mere good fortune, that we can comprehend the Psalms as poetry in very much the same way as the people of Israel did. We can see God’s deliberate providence in this.

The music is gone, lost in the avalanche of time that lies between us and the Psalmist. But that does not change the nature of the Psalms, nor does it particularly inhibit our understanding of the Psalms as songs. The original music is not essential. Music is embedded in culture. (This is not a statement of cultural relativism in general, but only in respect to music. Of course, the physics of music and of the ear is not optional or mutable, but everything else about music is.)

Fortunately, for us, the loss is not insurmountable. The original music would probably be as incomprehensible as the original Hebrew would be to most of us. But we can attach new music to the Psalms, music that makes sense within our own culture. It won’t be a perfect substitution, but we need not

despair of restoring these works of art to something approximating their original usage and function, even in translation and transplantation into our culture.

D. The Psalms as praise and devotion

One reason for the resiliency of the Psalms as praise and devotion is that the Psalms are more than songs. The Hebrew title, *Praises*, cracks open the door to an immense world of liturgical function that runs through the Psalms. Almost, we need not know what the feast or occasion was to understand what a psalm is saying to us liturgically, and what it meant to those using it, so vivid is the liturgical power of these works. This is the genius of the Spirit of God shining through, teaching us the praises that please the Father.

Also, the Psalms have been used in a special way for devotions by many saints throughout the ages. Many of the Psalms are prayers, and all address the LORD in some way, however indirectly. They place in our mouths the prayers and petitions that have been approved by God. Saying or praying the Psalms is a little like trying on a new suit of clothes to see if it fits, with this difference: if the clothes don't fit, we change them; if the Psalms don't fit, it is we who must change.

E. The Psalms as Scripture

The Psalms are also sacred Scripture, inspired by God. The penmen (primarily David) wrote what they had from the Spirit, however it came to them. Jesus Himself affirmed this. (Matt. 22:43; Mark 12:36) Here in the Psalms, we find the LORD, using the voice of the great master of harp and song, singing to us about Himself. Thus, the Psalms are Scripture and, like all Scripture, are “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” (2 Tim. 3:16) But there is still more.

The Psalms contain prophecies about Jesus, as He affirmed. (Luke 24:44) He taught that these prophecies must be fulfilled. Some prophecies are a bit oblique, as we have seen, but others are quite pointed and obvious. The New Testament writers made extensive use of the Psalms, quoting from them more than 120 times. Wherever we see a use made of the Psalms, it behooves us to stop and consider how the writer interprets the psalm, how he sees the psalm bearing on his subject.

F. The Psalms reveal the mind of God

God has revealed His mind throughout Scripture. In the Psalms, He does so in an unusual and remarkable way, in that the Psalmist is directly in touch with the Spirit, telling us what that experience is like. The Law and the covenants and the history of Israel are objective (which does not mean that they lack all personality), whereas the Psalms are highly subjective (though they presuppose the Law and the covenants).

We read in the Psalms how God has changed the Psalmist through their connection, what the Psalmist learned in it, and to a small extent, what agonies and ecstasies he experienced in the course of it. The last is the final reason that the Psalms must be poetry, for direct contact with the Spirit of God is inexpressible in natural language. (2 Cor. 12:4)

But to whom does God reveal His mind in this way? David, “a man after God's own heart.” (1 Sam 13:14) Flawed, sinful, in many ways broken, like us, David was the one to whom God opened His mind. And David's gifts are rendered perfect for conveying the truths and visions to which he was exposed.

G. The Psalms witness to the Messiah

Finally, because of the preponderance of psalms that bear directly or indirectly on the Messiah, we must consider how David witnessed to the Messiah and His role in the salvation of Israel and the world. In Psalm 22, we have an instance in which God opened to David the mind of Christ Himself, at the very moment in which the Messiah was fulfilling His role as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, as we shall see.]

II. “... and cast lots for my clothing”

Between Psalm 22 and the Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion there are numerous parallels. We will list the main ones here without going into detail.

1. They cast lots for His clothing—Ps. 22:18 parallels Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34. Cited in John 19:24. The citation in Matt. 27:35 is not in the oldest manuscripts.

Quotations Bible Study—Series 1, Week 7, The Atonement

2. They mocked Jesus, challenging Him with God’s failure to rescue Him—Ps. 22:8 parallels Matt. 27:42,43; Mark 15:31; Luke 23:35.
3. Jesus thirsted—Ps. 22:15 “... my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth...” parallels John 19:28. In Matt. 27:48 and Mark 15:23, Jesus was offered a drink but refused.

Though the parallels are not cited, Ps. 22 describes aspects of the crucifixion in stunning detail.

4. In Ps.22:6, the declaration, “I am a worm,” surely reflects the dehumanization of crucifixion and Jesus’ isolation from any form of aid.
5. In Ps. 22:6,7, the way David is despised is fulfilled in the ways that Jesus was mocked and despised in all four Gospel accounts.
6. Jesus was surrounded by His enemies, as in Ps. 22:12,13.
7. Ps. 22:14,15 describe physical exhaustion and extremity that, according to some doctors, mirrors very precisely the effects of crucifixion.
8. In Ps. 22:16, David says that his hands and feet have been pierced, the very definition of crucifixion, John 20:25.

All these parallels combine to form the impression that David had a vision of Jesus’ crucifixion—*from Jesus’ viewpoint*. This, despite the fact that crucifixion was a Roman custom and not a recognized form of punishment in David’s time—unknown, in fact, until 700 years later.

III. “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*”

Focus passages:

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—Matt. 27:46 (ESV)

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”—which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—Mark 15:34

Background: Matt. 27:45-50

Finally we come to the passage we began with, only this time it is on Jesus’ own lips, as He quoted the opening line of Psalm 22. As we consider the passage in detail, we ask what Jesus meant by His words. Did He say them with the intent to quote Psalm 22, thus suggesting the application of the whole psalm, or at least large parts of it? Or was this just His own personal cry of despair?

[Enrichment: In the passage in question, Matthew quoted Jesus speaking in Aramaic. This quotation is transliterated in Greek in Matthew, followed by a translation in Greek. Mark uses a transliteration of the Hebrew in the same way. C. H. Toy affirms that neither owes anything to the Septuagint. The exact linguistic implications of the quotation and its presentation in the Gospels does not really concern us here. What matters is what Jesus meant by it.

Strangely, the NIV does not follow Matthew's transliteration of Jesus' cry “Eli, Eli ...” but substitutes the text from Mark, “Eloi, Eloi...” relegating the alternative to a footnote. Every text I consulted has “Eli,” as does C. H. Toy, endorsed by Gaebelien. While there may be some authority for the NIV's choice here, it leaves the matter of the onlookers' reference to “Elijah” in the next verse unnecessarily more mysterious. For this reason, I have cited the ESV on this verse rather than the NIV.]

For our answer, let us look at two other Scriptures, 2 Cor. 5:21 and Heb. 2:10. In 2 Cor. 5:21, Paul writes that Jesus was made to be sin, though He never sinned. Under that assumption, Jesus experienced on the Cross what it was like to be separated from God, the alienation from God that all sinners are in. I think that what this looked and felt like to Jesus is what David said in the psalm, complaining that he is forsaken and that God does not hear.

Then in Heb. 2:10, the writer says that Jesus was made perfect through suffering. Suffering what? Well, not just physical suffering, perhaps, but also the suffering associated with the condemnation He accepted on our behalf. From the point of view of the writer of Hebrews, this was not only necessary to secure salvation, but it perfected the Savior. The purpose of this perfecting step is outlined in Heb. 2:11, so that Jesus has complete solidarity with those He saved. Thus, the suffering had to be that which is

Quotations Bible Study—Series 1, Week 7, The Atonement

common to all men, not the physical suffering which some men experience and others not, but the suffering of separation from God that all men experience from birth, but that until this time, Jesus had never experienced for even the briefest moment.

IV. Conclusion

Restating the question, then:

Q25: Did Jesus intentionally quote Psalm 22, thus invoking the entire context of Psalm 22, or was the outcry of “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me” a cry of ultimate despair?

Q26: We noticed numerous parallels between the crucifixion story and Psalm 22 in the course of the survey above. Did Jesus comprehend these as well?

The suffering was real. We are given no satisfactory explanation as to how Jesus, who was God Incarnate, could be alienated from God. But we can be assured that it was so experienced. For only as He bore our sins, as He took the punishment for us, was salvation made possible.

Q27: Was Jesus’ suffering reflected in the expression of despair in Ps. 22:1?

“Jesus ventured to trust God far beyond the degree that any other man had trusted God,” wrote J. R. Cogdell. Jesus trusted God to the point of death *and* to the point of alienation from God. The purpose of this trust is given a definition in Ps. 22:30,31, in which David says that the true worship of God (in the Gospel as David has seen it) will be declared to “a people that shall be born.” Whom was David talking about? In his essay on Psalm 22, Cogdell concludes,

“...in Ps. 22:27-31, Jesus sees beyond the limits of the immediate to the wider fruits of his ordeal. The whole world shall hear the gospel and turn to the Lord (Ps. 22:27), and future generations shall hear of these things (Ps. 22:30,31). This last section of the psalm reminds us of Heb. 12:2: ‘Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.’ The ‘joy’ that was set before Jesus was, we feel, knowing of the riches which would come to his brethren out of his death. In short, *we* are his joy, set before him when on the cross. As we have seen, only as the circle of the love of Jesus becomes world wide and as big as history will it be complete.”

The Atonement was accomplished, at unimaginable personal cost, but with inexpressible profit, through the love of God for His people. Three days later, it was vindicated by the Resurrection of the Savior, and now Joy lives forever.

Can we pray this **prayer** together?

Father, we kneel in awe of the great mystery of the atonement for mankind’s sins through the suffering and death of Jesus on the Cross. We see, in part, what it cost Him. Strengthen us, we pray, for the far smaller sacrifices demanded of us in the service of the joy that was set before Him, in Jesus’ Name, amen.