

Good Friday

COMPANIONS IN THE DARKNESS

Psalm 22

Good Friday

Analysis by Fred Niedner

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

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

2 O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

3 Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

4 In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.

5 To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

6 But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people.

7 All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

8 "Commit your cause to the LORD;

let him deliver – let him rescue the one in whom he delights!"

9 Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast.

10 On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

11 Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

12 Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

13 they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and

roaring lion.

14 I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint;

my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast;

15 my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.

16 For dogs are all around me;

a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shriveled;

17 I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me;

18 they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.

19 But you, O LORD, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!

20 Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog!

21 Save me from the mouth of the lion!

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

22 I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

23 You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;

stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

24 For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;

he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;

those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever!

27 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD;

and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.

28 For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.

29 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.

30 Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord,

31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.



By *Diego* *Velázquez* —
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A brutalized young man in the deep darkness outside Herod's and Pilate's Jerusalem one Friday afternoon long ago ... sang this very song, cried out its awful question: "My God, my God, why? Why have even you forsaken me?"

DIAGNOSIS: Abandoned—What a Scandal!

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Thrown to the Dogs

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen—or gives a rip. My body aches—what's left of it, anyway—and my courage has melted. My dried-up tongue cleaves to the roof of my mouth, so when I speak it sounds like the vultures have shoved my socks down my throat and are just waiting to run off with my clothes the moment I croak. The Bashan Bullies gang has come to watch me die. The dogs that will one day lick poor Lazarus's wounds are making me their first course. If I could still speak, I'd tell them to go eat worms. Then again, I am a worm.

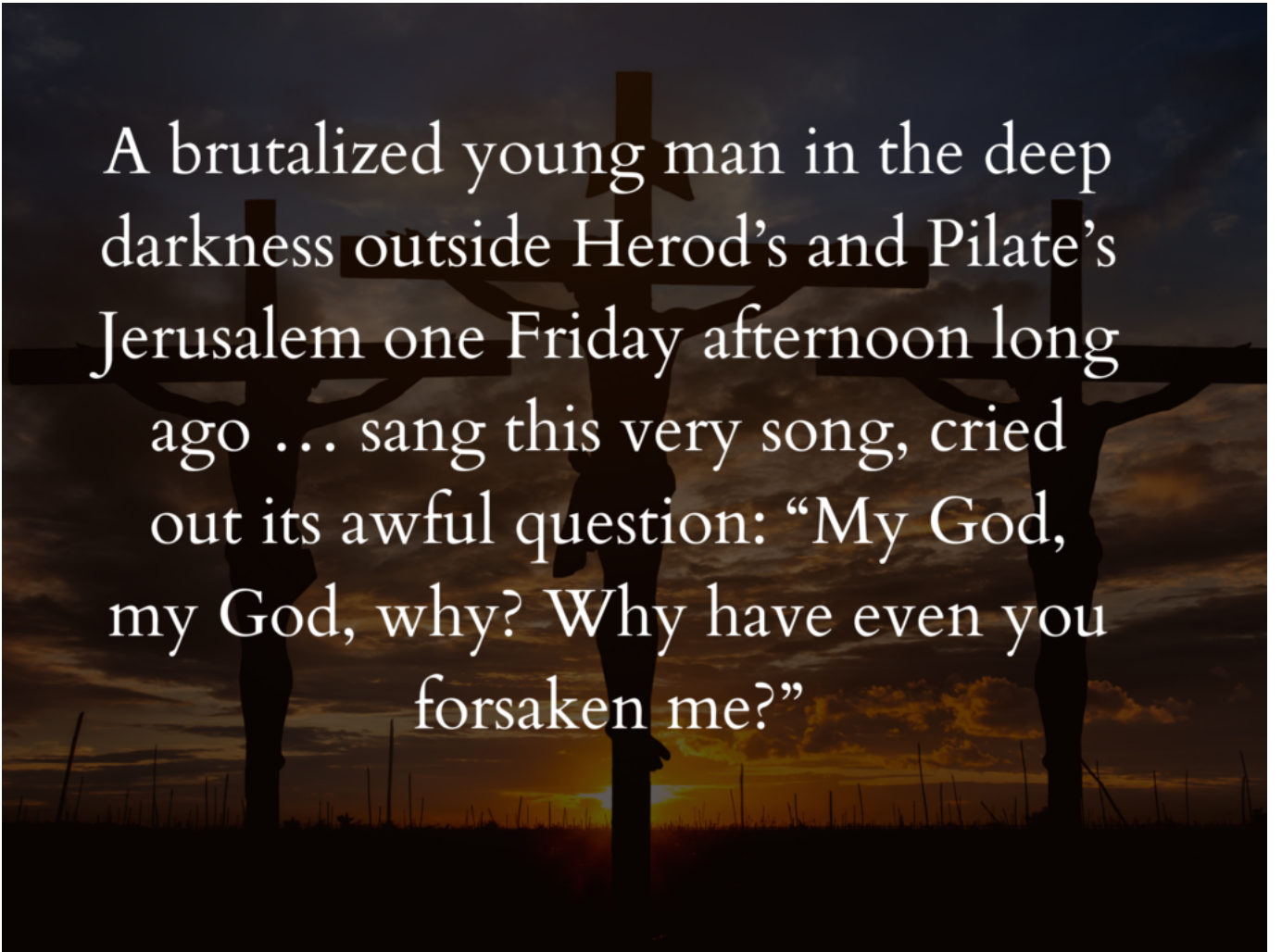
Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Can You Trust Your Awesome God?

You see all this, don't you God? Everyone else does. I've attracted a crowd of gawkers and professional Schadenfreudists. They've waited for this day. They mock me, screw up their faces to imitate my anguish. "Where's your High and Mighty God now?" they ask. "If you're the apple of God's eye, when will deliverance come? We've heard all the rescue stories you yourself have told us about the God of your ancestors. Have you ever wondered if maybe your God's only 'throne' is the stories you tell and the songs you sing? And maybe God only listens when you praise, not when you beg for your life, or the lives of your children?"

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): It's a Hell of a Life

I confess, these jeerers' jibes and questions rattle around in my soul as well. Indeed, I have been abandoned. I cry and pray and groan. I gag wordlessly on sorrow. Then I do it some more. No one hears. I truly am a worm, no longer human. If hell is the absence of God, then I have arrived. Let me die. I'm good as

dead anyway. And to paraphrase an old friend from the Land of Uz, "To hell with you, too, God."

A photograph of three crosses on a hill at sunset. The sky is a mix of dark blue and orange, with silhouettes of the crosses and the figures on them. The text is overlaid in white, serif font.

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Why have you forsaken me? (from Canva)

PROGNOSIS: Hell Un-helled

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): A New Voice Joins the Hell Choir

Does anyone hear the howling in hell? Can high heaven escape the stink of Gehenna? Even if no one hears, its denizens cry out perpetually ... as have countless mothers who begged for the lives of their fevered or starving babies, and then buried them. As have millions marched into gas chambers even as they sang the

psalms of Zion. As have thousands of generations born into slavery and treated like mules and sex toys for the few years of the only life they would ever get as flesh and blood. As did a brutalized young man in the deep darkness outside Herod's and Pilate's Jerusalem one Friday afternoon long ago. Indeed, he sang this very song, cried out its awful question: "My God, my God, why? Why have even you forsaken me?" And just then, of all people, a centurion, the head executioner, recognized him. Something about that song had rent the heavens, and behold, it was him! Yes, we were still in hell. Indeed, we find ourselves there—here—even as we speak . . . and as we sing that psalm, but we sing it now with him. We are not alone. And he says what he always says, "Come, follow me."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Flipping the Script

So, we do. Foolish as it seems, we trust him. We follow—as best we can with our hands and feet nailed to these damned posts. In the congregation of the nailed and abandoned, we tell our stories, especially the astonishing news about finding the One who claims dominion, who rules over the nations, right here, in the pit, every bit as naked, wrecked, and derided as we are. Here, together, we raise up our praise in the great congregation. Our God is enthroned on the hymns of the damned. We reckon they might even hear us up there somewhere in the Bashan Bullies' skyboxes. It must sound like a joke in those lofty reaches. And it is, actually—but it's on them.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Singing the Hell out of Hell

You'd think that now we would organize a way to bust out of here, go off to the Garden of Eden somewhere, or join a heavenly choir that feasts on mangos between rehearsals and gigs. We

could, perhaps, but that's not our calling. That crucified singer in our midst, upon hearing our songs of confession, reminds us daily that for now, at least, this is our place. It's a hell of a place, but it's our place, even as it's now surely his. And as he once told his sinks-like-a-stone friend, "They can't keep you out." So, we stay. We keep singing, but we listen with just as much care and purpose as we sing. We listen with our hearts to the cries of the lost and abandoned, including the wordless choking of the broken and condemned. We sit with them, take in their anguish, share with them the strange manna we always seem to find. And because we keep listening to that lonely, crucified singer, we needn't say to the others, "Follow us to true life and freedom." No, we get to say to each new companion, "Blessed are you. You're already here."