

Good Friday, Gospel Year A

Between Doubt and Faith

Psalm 22

Good Friday

Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

*1My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my
groaning?
2O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.
3Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
4In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
5To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
6But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
7All 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!"
9Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
10On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
11Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.
12Many bulls encircle me,*

strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
13they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.
14I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
15my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
16For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;
17I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
18they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.
19But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
20Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
21Save me from the mouth of the lion!
From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
22I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
23You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
24For 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.
25From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

*26The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live forever!*
*27All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.*
*28For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.*
*29To 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.*
*30Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the LORD,
31and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.*

Author's Note: The Gospels of Matthew and Mark both put the opening words of this Psalm on the lips of Jesus on the cross. In the depths of his suffering, Jesus quotes Psalm 22:1. This "cry of dereliction" has shaped the church's understanding of Jesus' crucifixion ever since. This desperate and hopeless lament surely reflects the depth of Jesus' suffering on the cross. Scholars have debated whether Jesus spoke only the first verse or recited the whole Psalm or at least intended to. Nevertheless, the whole Psalm is recited in Good Friday worship. When that is done, one is struck by the dramatic change in mood and message beginning with verse 21b. The Psalmist abruptly goes from bitter lament to joyful praise. That change is reflected in this analysis and is central to its evangelical use in proclamation.



DIAGNOSIS: The Cry of Doubt

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): “Bulls Encircle Me” (v. 12)

When your world is falling apart, fear and paranoia lurk around every corner. The world literally becomes an enemy. For Jesus that was literally the case. His enemies had put him on the cross. Mocked and ridiculed, despised and scorned (vv. 6-7), his enemies seem like bulls about to overrun him or lions about to devour him (vv. 12-13). His enemies have trapped him, like a pack of dogs about to pounce on their prey (v. 16). He feels subhuman, no better than a worm (v. 6). Stripped naked, his enemies delight in humiliating him by gambling for his clothing (v. 18). Not only was Jesus’ spirit battered on the cross, so was his body. The anguish and pain drip like hot wax on tender

skin (v. 14). His relentless thirst signals that death is near (v. 15). The Psalmist's vivid description of the psychology of suffering not only reflects the plight of Jesus, but the plight of any human who has suffered. It simply hurts!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): "You Do Not Answer" (v. 2)

Beneath the psychic and physical pain lurks the haunting spiritual pain. The questions of meaning and purpose gnaw at any confidence that any of this makes sense. Doubt slowly corrodes the foundations of what trust you ever had in fairness or justice. Ultimately, the Psalmist questions the very goodness of God. He has trusted in God from the day of his birth (vv. 9-10). However, now in his time of need, there is no God to help him (v. 11). God had always been there to deliver God's people in the past. Israel trusted God. When they were in trouble, that trust was not in vain. God came through and delivered them (vv. 3-5). Now in his time of need, the suffering of the Psalmist . . . and Jesus . . . mock and ridicule any trust they had in God (v. 8).

Inevitably, we all ask that unanswerable question (v. 2) that never goes away: Why do bad things happen to good people? How can a God who is all-powerful and always loving, permit such innocent and horrible suffering, especially when it is my suffering? God is either not all-powerful or not all-loving. If either is true, then this is no God worth having. If both are true, then this God is a demon.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): "Why Have You Forsaken Me?" (v. 1)

Pushed to the brink, the Psalmist (and Jesus) must finally entertain the most terrifying question of all: Has God forsaken him (v. 1)? Despite his pleading, begging and questioning, God

remains silent (v. 2). His pleas for deliverance (vv. 19-21) seem to have fallen on deaf ears. The evidence is clear. The suffering, silence and death all signal that God has turned away. Faced with this horrible possibility, he despairs of very goodness of God. Can he continue to believe in God at all? If he cannot, then he is a First Commandment breaker, a sinner. All of us sinners have been there. We all have been in the clutches of doubt. And we know what God does to sinners who have given up on God. . . .

When Jesus uttered this cry of dereliction, we see the dramatic climax of the incarnation. As Paul reminds us (2 Cor. 5:21 and Gal. 3:13), on the cross Jesus became a sinner and suffered the sinner's fate: death. Dare we say it, even think it? Has Jesus become a First Commandment breaker, a doubter, like all the rest of us? With this cry of dereliction, Jesus' identification with sinners is complete. He who knew no sin has become the ultimate sinner . . . and must suffer the consequences.

PROGNOSIS: The Cry of Faith

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): "He Did Not Hide His Face from Me" (v. 24)

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Psalm dramatically change. The darkness and despair disappear. A joyous song of thanksgiving begins. For the Psalmist the lament

and doubt of vv. 1-21a transform into expressions of confidence and faith in vv. 21b – 31. God had acted in some way that helped him to keep faith. This faith made it possible for him to express his deepest doubt and despair in the first part of the Psalm.

What about Jesus? Were his words the ultimate expression doubt and despair? Therefore, he only quoted verse 1. Or . . . was his lament an expression of his still confident faith as reflected in verses 21b – 31? It is an unanswerable question that ultimately does not matter.

What does matter is that this Psalm is recited in the context of GOOD Friday worship. It is GOOD Friday because of what happened in three days. We would not even have GOOD Friday worship were it not for Easter. The day would only be a BAD Friday, filled with disappointment. Even if Jesus had all of Psalm 22 in mind when he cried out in despair, if he had not been raised, he would only have been another dead dreamer.

However, on the third day everyone was surprised. The God-forsaken One was raised from death and from God-forsakenness. God refused to hide his face and turn away from the chief of sinners (v. 24). Instead God “smiles.” God heard Jesus’ cries and answers. Jesus’ love of sinners, even to the point of becoming one of them, had been God’s idea all along. Jesus’ resurrection is a sign of the fate that awaits all who believe in him . . . even us as we struggle with the dark nights of our own doubt and despair. Talk about good news!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): “I Will Praise You” (v. 22)

Trusting that good news, what do we do? We join the Psalmist in verses 21b – 31. The cries of doubt and despair become the cries of faith, praising God who did not despise and abhor the

afflicted (v. 24). The broken hearts that had given up on God now are alive, worshiping God—confident that his love is for everyone (vv. 27-28).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): “I Shall Live for Him” (v. 29)

Previously the Psalmist had turned inward because of his pain and suffering. All he . . . and we could see was our own misery. However, with a new heart and renewed faith we can join the Psalmist looking outward. Instead of being self-obsessed, we can live for God . . . by proclaiming the good news of God’s deliverance (v. 31). A world filled with enemies now is a world where even enemies can be transformed by the good news and join us in the worship and praise of God (vv. 29-31). We all discover that we can even express our deepest doubts and despair and still be confident that God will not hide his face from us.