

Psalm Twenty-Two

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
“Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”

Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.
On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.

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

For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;
I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.

But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
Save me from the mouth of the lion!

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when cried to him.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.

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.
Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (v. 1a)

Stanley Crouch once referred to it as “perhaps the greatest blues line of all time.”¹ He was talking about when Jesus cried those words from the cross, but Jesus, of course, was quoting from this chapter of the Hebrew psalter when he did.

It is a helpful way of hearing and understanding the words of this psalm. Originating out of the 19th century African-American experience, the blues is known for being a vehicle for the voice of the poor, the enslaved, the suffering, and the oppressed.

Psalms 22 is attributed to David, and was likely set to its own tune, though one long since lost to history. It begins with that call that is, as Crouch observed, so like that of the blues singer. Except, that unlike the musical setting of the genre, where it would often be met with a response, only silence is heard in reply:

“I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.” (v. 2).

David wails his woes, with lyrics laced with imagery to suit. He is despised and trampled on, like a worm – the lowest of all forms of life (v.6). He is surrounded by wild bulls, hungry lions, and feral dogs (vv. 12-13, 16). His body is at a breaking-point (vv. 14-15, 17), his soul is in anguish (14a, 20).

It is not doubt, so much as it is despair. He believes in God. He speaks to God. But God simply is not there. He has been abandoned, turned over to those who seek to do him harm.

And then something changes, about halfway through. It’s unclear why, but the tone shifts, and other voices suddenly join in (v. 22), until it is as if all the world is singing joyful praises with him (v. 27). The God who was not there suddenly is again (v.24).

I find it to be the most fascinating part of the psalm, and the experience it represents - that point of transition where the heaviness lifts and the sorrow is all but forgotten. It is at once so striking, and yet hardly noticeable at all. I have been there, so many times, but I still find myself asking “what happened?” Reading these lines again, I wonder if part of it was the singing, itself. I wonder if the paradoxical prayer, in which one brings to God one’s experience of God-forsakenness does something.

Another musician once wrote of Psalm 22, “in the cave of despair, the blues saves us.”²

Like the blues, the lament psalms (of which this is one) provide a means of faithfully and creatively expressing our pain in a way that saves us. We are invited to join in. For Stanley Crouch the significance of those opening words was not just that Jesus would pray them as his own in the midst of his suffering, but that Crouch’s people – Black Americans – might pray them as well, in the midst of theirs.

I cannot claim any of those experiences. I cannot claim anything close to them. But I can relate to the words of Psalm 22, at times, and believe there is something significant about the way that they have been prayed and prayed again, sung and re-sung over the centuries. Something that speaks to a place where the work of a redeeming God intersects with the universal human condition. –NS

¹ Crouch, *The All American Skin Game*

² Bono, as quoted in Taylor, *The Open and Unafraid: Psalms as a Guide to Life*