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Psalm 22

meditation 1—Introductory

In exploring this Psalm, we must address the elephant in the room. That elephant is the Christological/Messianic reading that Christianity has from its very beginnings placed on it. We will discuss this at the end of these meditations devoted to Psalm 22. But first, we will approach the Psalm as we do all Psalms: within its canonical context and in its own right, believing, as we do, that the Christological/Messianic reading of the text is not original but secondary—legitimately secondary, but secondary nonetheless.

As with Psalm 2, we must consider Psalm 22 from more than one perspective. One is the original ancient context where the psalm is perhaps first to be located in an individual's suffering. The second context is to be found in its use within Jerusalem's temple cult. The third context is related to Jesus of Nazareth. In this case, it is not only Christian interpretation that is at issue, but the man himself, as Jesus is reported to have prayed the first line of the Psalm, finding in the words an accurate reflection of his thoughts, feelings, and experiences as he suffered the agonies of the cross. A fourth context exists in which every reader, no matter the place or time in which they live, can apply it in their own lives during times of trial and affliction.

Whichever of the contexts we consider—an ancient individual's suffering, a temple prayer during a time of real or ritualistic suffering, the suffering of Jesus of Nazareth, or our own suffering—we have in the first two-thirds of the psalm one of the most intense laments found in the Psalter (vs. 1-21). The appeal to God's help is unsparing. So too is his critique of God. Though God has always been present in both the nation's and the Psalmist's past, He is inexplicably absent in this moment of greatest need, seemingly content to sit on His glorious and comfortable throne where He enjoys personal safety and basks in the praises of a nation.

The description of the Psalmist's enemies is even more unsparing and critical. In their hateful attack, the Psalmist's enemies have lost their humanity, their behavior more animalistic than human. Some have sensed an almost demonic aspect to the intensity of the enemies' hatred and violence. We can fully understand this impression. Finally, the Psalmist describes his own physical and spiritual suffering in language and imagery that is as intense as anywhere in the Psalms. His body and spirit are shattered and decimated, ripped apart and bled dry as if by ferocious predatory beasts.

In the end, however, the sufferer survives. Though the Psalmist does not describe the moment or means of salvation as he did, for example, in Psalm 18, He survives because God finally hears and responds to his plea. Because of God's deliverance in the face of such devastating suffering, the last third of the psalm reflects the Psalmist's commitment to praise God and make His compassion and power known (vs. 22-31). This commitment is as strongly stated as anywhere in the Psalter, matching the intensity of the lament and the danger found in the first two-thirds. The Psalmist intends through his praise of God to become a great world evangelist. His praise will not only be heard and known among his own people in temple assembly (vs. 22), but they will join him. His praise will not only be known to "the ends of the world" (vs. 27), but it will join him. His praise will reach out even to generations to come (vs. 31), which will join him in his praise. Indeed, all, the living, the dying, and the dead (vs. 29) will praise God through the Psalmist's committed evangelization.

We will consider all this and more in our series of meditations focused on Psalm 22. It is deservedly one of the best known of all Psalms. It provides strength in trial. It strengthens our confidence in God. It reinforces our desire to laud God to others. It increases our appreciation for Jesus and his endurance in the

trial of faith and suffering that he experienced as he sought to do his Father's will in hopes of revealing Father's character and bringing salvation to a humanity much in need of such revelation and salvation.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 14, 2024)

meditation 2— psalm 22.¹⁻³

- ¹My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?
Why are You so far from helping me?
Why are You so far from my vigorous complaint?
- ²My God, I call out during the day, but You don't respond.
And during the night, even then I have no respite.
- ³But You, Incomparable One,
Just sit there amidst Yiśrā'ēl's praises (author's translation).

For many, Jesus' utterance of the first line of Psalm 22 from the cross turns the line and all that follows into prophecy/ prediction. According to this view, the author of the psalm, traditionally David, saw Jesus hanging on the cross, saw his utterance of these words, and recorded these words from his vision. Maybe. The people of David's time were as much in need of Jesus' revelation of at-one-ment as any, including you and I today. And, scripture is pretty clear that, having "created all men" God "bring[s] forth [his] word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth."¹

In the end, though, it is the message of the psalm, including the message that is found in Jesus' praying its first line from his cross, that increases my testimony of both the value of scripture and the necessity of Jesus and his atonement. I could, I think, do without the prediction that others find in this Psalm. But I could not do without the message that Jesus' praying of the Psalm's first line sends. In this and the following meditation, I will share a couple of messages I learn from Jesus' praying of this first line of Psalm 22.

Many—a shamefully many, many— have, as the Psalmist does in this psalm, felt the humiliating sting of others' rejection, persecution, and oppression. In this sting, many have been made to feel and, indeed, have felt that their rejection, their abandonment by others was a sign of God's abandonment. And surely, for the religious mind, there is no low lower than the feeling of being abandoned by God. Many have prayed the words of this first line, either exactly, as in Jerusalem's temple, or in words very much like them in everyday life outside the temple.

In these initial words from Psalm 22, Jesus finds words that coincide with his own experience and his feelings of humiliation and abandonment. He has experienced the lowest of lows. But more than this, in uttering these words, Jesus demonstrates and proves the reality of his connectedness, his at-one-ment with all of us, but especially those who have felt the sting of other's rejection, persecution, oppression, and abandonment. Moreover, he bears witness to the fact that as part of this unity he feels with humankind, he experiences all that humankind experiences—all its highs and its deepest lows—including the terrifying feeling of God's abandonment.

So, for me, Jesus' utterance of this first line of Psalm 22 is confirmation of the testimony born by the writer of Hebrews that Jesus was "made like unto his brethren" As such, it also testifies to the surety of the help and deliverance he brings.

"In all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God... For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted."²

How could Jesus succour those who feel the sting of God's absence—more imagined than real—without

¹ 2 Nephi 29.⁷

² Hebrews 2.¹⁷⁻¹⁸

himself having a perfect sense of what it feels like? Oh, but how much worse for him. During his earthly ministry, he testified that “the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him.”³

When I witness how easily Jesus latched onto scripture, found in them something of himself, and used them to express his deepest feelings, I find a testimony of the value of scripture that is as powerful as any. But more importantly, when I hear Jesus confess that he has descended to my depth, and then lower still, my trust in his ability to reach me and then pull me from even the deepest depths grows.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 14, 2024)

³ John 8.²⁹

meditation 3— psalm 22.¹⁻³

¹My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?
Why are You so far from helping me?
Why are You so far from my vigorous complaint?
²My God, I call out during the day, but You don't respond.
And during the night, even then I have no respite.
³But You, Incomparable One,
Just sit there amidst Yiśrā'ēl's praises (author's translation).

As we indicated in the introductory meditation, this Psalm can be considered from the perspective of at least four contexts: the suffering of an ancient individual, the expression of personal, national, or cultic suffering in Jerusalem's temple, the suffering of Jesus of Nazareth, and the suffering of any individual anywhere and anytime.

One can easily imagine the words of the psalm's first line being uttered under any of these situations and environments. It is surely a common occurrence for individuals to feel abandoned by God during times of deep trial. The Psalmist's express such feelings often.

“Why, Yahweh, are you now so standoffish?
Why do you remain absent during these distressing times?”¹

“How long, YHWH? Will you ignore me forever?
How long will you be absent in my life?”²

“Then, you hid your face from me
and I became alarmed.”³

“It was I, only I, who thought, in my alarm, ‘I have been abandoned by you.’”⁴

We could go on, but you get the idea. Perhaps the reader has experienced such trials and the accompanying feelings of abandonment.

When such feelings of abandonment come to us, we might feel unfaithful, as if such feelings themselves were indicative of doubt toward God. We might refrain from uttering such words, fearing they reflect a lack of faith, maybe even an arrogant confrontation with God. But the Psalmist reminds us that such feelings, and the expression of such feelings are anything but faithless. Such honesty is a sign of deep and abiding faith in God.

If we doubt this assertion, we should once more call to mind that none other than Jesus the Christ uttered the opening words of this psalm. We would like to take a moment to meditate upon Jesus' use of this opening line of Psalm 22.

As the opening words, “My God, my God,” indicate, we have entered the realm of prayer. When Jesus uttered the words, “My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?” from the cross, he was engaged in heartfelt communication with God. And, being engaged in prayer, he uttered words that had been repeated

¹ Psalm 10.¹, author's translation

² Psalm 13.1, author's translation

³ Psalm 30.⁷, author's translation

⁴ Psalm 31.²², author's translation

many, many times by many individuals as part of their temple worship and what some might call, unwisely, “rote prayer.”

Jesus’ praying the very words so often prayed by so many others reminds us that the mere repetition of words, or the prayerful recitation of words often prayed by others, does not qualify as the “vain repetition” against which Jesus warned.⁵ Jesus’ repetition was not “vain,” no matter how often or by how many these words had been repeated, because they reflected a profound and heartfelt truth in that moment of agony. In this psalm’s opening words, Jesus found an expression of his own deepest feelings. Jesus unimaginably came to feel, as others have, what it felt like to feel that God had abandoned him. Jesus’ truth turned these words from being those of others to being his own. No prayer, no matter how often or by how many it might be offered, is “vain” when it is fully adopted into one’s truth.

So, Jesus’ use of an oft repeated prayer can serve as a reminder that true prayer comes from deep within the human soul and that any words, even those oft repeated, when they reveal and express the deep truths that reside in us will find their way to the throne of Him who sits enthroned in celestial glory.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 14, 2024)

⁵ See Matthew 6.⁷

- ¹My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?
Why are You so far from helping me?
Why are You so far from my vigorous complaint?
- ²My God, I call out during the day, but You don't respond.
And during the night, even then I have no respite.
- ³But You, Incomparable One,
Just sit there amidst Yiśrā'ēl's praises (author's translation).

The KJV's translation of the second line, "Thou inhabitest the praises of Israel," is so beautiful. The idea is so uplifting. I hear and love the truth that can certainly be heard in it. That said, I have reservations about the mood that is assigned to this line—a mood of happy and grateful praise. These things are certainly subjective, but I, for one, do not hear happy and grateful praise in this line. I hear a different tone: the tone of complaint.

When we think of translation, we think first of dictionaries and lexemes, replacing words from one language with words from another. We might then think of grammar and syntax. More rarely, we might consider the historical and literary context. And even more rarely, we might think of mood and tone. But certainly, the tone or mood of words, phrases, and sentences is as much a part of the translation process as determining the lexical or grammatical nature of words and phrases and the context in which they are found.

However we think of translation, we have been conditioned by our age of reason and science to believe that an "accurate and true translation" is achievable. We might even reason that "the one and only true translation" is achievable. But translation is not a science. And when it comes to the translation of ancient texts such as Psalms, a "one and only true translation" is as impossible as impossible gets. I suppose it would be possible if the original Psalm writer/ composer sat right next to us and directed our new language translation. But, notwithstanding claims of inspiration through the Holy Spirit, this is as unlikely as the impossibility of translating a "one and only true translation" of individual Psalms.

I contemplate all this and more as we consider and translate Psalm 22.¹⁻³, and more especially when I contemplate and translate verse 3. Though we can identify each grammatical element of the Hebrew verse—from its initial conjunction to its final personal name—and can identify the meaning of each word and grammatical element, our work is still not finished. We must consider context, most especially the context provided by surrounding verses. And we must consider tone or mood.

The context of verse 3 is clear. The Psalmist is in trouble. Just how much trouble will become clear as we proceed. But with the three opening questions of verse one—in reality, one question thrice repeated in different words—we know that whatever the trouble, it has been made worse by God's inexplicable absence. Verse two expands on this divine absence. God has, the Psalmist feels and expresses, "abandoned" the Psalmist. God is "far away." He is unresponsive to the Psalmist's continual cries for help so that the Psalmist's dire condition sees no improvement. Such is the lead up to verse 3.

The Psalmist's complaint continues on the other side of verse 3. Notwithstanding God's reputation as a deliverer, built on Israel's past experiences and the Psalmist own previous positive encounters with Divinity, the Psalmist is still in trouble and far from being delivered. Finding him repulsive and treating him as something less than human, the Psalmist's enemies are right up in his face, hissing insults and taunts while they bare their teeth and wag their heads.

So, coming back to verse 3, we note that the KJV translators do not mistranslate a single word. They

commit no grammatical or syntactical errors. And yet, their translation of the verse does not seem to adequately fit the context or partake of the mood and tone of all that surrounds it.

Whether one imagines God's throne to be in the dark and restricted confines of the temple's Holiest Place, or in the bright brilliance of heaven itself, God remains on His throne. He refuses to leave His sacred space and enter that space in which the Psalmist suffers. While the Psalmist suffers and pleads, pleads and suffers, God inextricably remains seated on his throne surrounded by the ascending voices of His worshipers.

It is true that God sits on a throne. It is true that He sits enthroned. It is true that He is gloriously enthroned. It is true that our Hebrew verb, *yāšab*, used here, can say all of that. But is this how the Psalmist means to use it here, in this instance? Is it possible that the Psalmist's does not feel or communicate any of this with his present use of *yāšab*? Is it possible that we have something here that is very different than happy worship? Is it possible to understand the present *yāšab* as a disillusioned, perhaps angry and even sarcastic *yāšab*? (Indeed, ought we, as we sometimes do when we indicate sarcasm, enclose "Incomparable One" within quotation marks in our translation, indicative of the Psalmist's feelings that God is not acting like an Incomparable One right now in his life?). Could our *yāšab* be just plain ol' "sit"? Is God just "sitting," doing nothing? Is He too busy enjoying the praises heaped upon Him to pay attention to the Psalmist plight? Too comfortable to act? Too enraptured? Is God, like everyone else, too wrapped up in His own life to bother with anyone else's?

Many readers will likely reply, "No. The Psalmist can't mean any or all of that. The Psalmist is a faithful believer in and follower of God." To which, I say, "Perhaps you've not been tried as the Psalmist was tried, stretched to the breaking point as he was here?"

Or, "Perhaps you misunderstand what it means to believe in and follow God."

Might believing in and following God faithfully include having the faith in Him to speak honestly to Him? To know that He wants to hear the unadulterated truth of our thoughts and feelings? To know that He can take our honest feelings of disappointment, maybe even anger toward him? That He endures it? That He appreciates it?

Yes, it seems to me that we ought at the very least to give serious consideration to the tone and mood of verse three. We ought to look for that tone and mood in what proceeds and follows it. We ought to consider the verse as partaking of the same spirit of complaint as what proceeds and follows it. And we ought to have enough respect for God to know that He desires and appreciates honesty, even when it is unpleasant, maybe even questioning and critical of Him. We ought to have enough faith in Him, as the Psalmist did, to know that it is our sincerity, our honesty that draws Him to us and brings, finally, the deliverance that we so earnestly seek.

This is surely what repentance is. Brutal, often ugly honesty. And look how faithfully God responds to that honesty! Surely, God responds no less faithfully to the honesty of complain and lamentation. Indeed, this is one of the greatest, most frequent testimonies contained within the Psalter.

So, yes, I think it possible that in verse 3 the sufferer is *not* offering a word of praise in hopes of convincing, almost manipulating God to take action on his behalf. Rather, I think it possible, even likely, that he is truly complaining, as he has done from the start of the Psalm, about God's inaction. Verse three is as likely to possess the tone of accusation as worship. That is bold. And it is faithful. For it is an expression of the Psalmist's true feelings. I, for one, hope and strive to possess this kind of integrity and faith before my God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(*edition: may 14, 2024*)

⁴Our fathers trusted You.

They trusted and You delivered them.

⁵They cried out to You, and they were delivered

They trusted You, and were not disappointed.

⁶But I am a nonentity, and less than human;

a human disgrace, whom many find repulsive.

⁷Everyone who sees me hisses at me.

They bare their teeth. They wag the head.

⁸“He has anticipated that YHWH would deliver him.

He should deliver him, then, seeing that He takes such pleasure in him” (author’s translation).

In verses 1-3, the Psalmist has already expressed his confusion, perhaps even anger at God’s seeming indifference and certain inactivity during a period of deep trouble and affliction. Thrice, he has asked, “Why?” Why this indifference and inactivity? As we understand it, the Psalmist has expressed his feelings that perhaps God is simply too busy enjoying Israel’s praises to leave His throne and involve Himself in the Psalmist’s ugly affairs.

In this reading, the Psalmist goes on to express what leaves him even more confused than he already is about God’s inactivity in the face of his life-threatening trials. The Psalmist inherited and has believed the stories he has been told about God and His activity in the life of Israel. He could perhaps recite the stories: how God delivered Abraham from Pharaoh and others; how God delivered the refugee Issac in a hostile land; how God delivered Joseph from death and imprisonment; how God delivered Jacob and his family from famine to mention but a few examples of God’s deliverance in the people’s history. Most certainly, he has been told and believed that God heard the complaint of His people as they suffered the indignities and cruelties of Egyptian slavery.

“And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour: and they made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field: all their service, wherein they made them serve, was with rigour.”¹

God saw the indignities and cruelties Israel suffered under Egyptian slavery and responded.

“And the Lord said, ‘I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey...’”²

We all know the rest of the story: the plagues, the Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea, the destruction of the Egyptian army, etc.

The Psalmist has heard and believed all of this and more. God delivered the nation from its enemies over and over again. And, having believed these inherited and cherished stories of divine deliverance, the Psalmist has always anticipated that should he, himself, be afflicted and call out to God for deliverance, God would respond consistent with His character and past behavior.

¹ Exodus 1. ¹³⁻¹⁴

² Exodus 3. ⁷⁻⁸

Surely, the Psalmist's present affliction is no less than the past afflictions of the nation. He is looked upon as one might look upon a worm: of no account, inhuman. But, it is precisely because he is a human being, that his state is even worse than that of a worm. A worm cannot feel disgrace or humiliation or think of itself as repulsive. But the Psalmist can and does.

So, why is God not responding in the present circumstances as He has responded in the past? Little wonder that his persecutors throw God's indifference and inactivity in his face. In His absence and inactivity, God has shamed him as much as his enemies have through their threats and persecution. How has God become party of the abusers?

This is all horribly devastating to read. How much worse to experience it! It is one thing to be without help when one does not expect help. But to have expected help, especially from a source with a reputation for reliability, and then not get it? This is doubly devastating and demoralizing. To be treated inhumanly when God has made one feel so fully human and so fully valued? This is the worst kind of dehumanization.

As devastating and demoralizing as all of this is, the Psalmist is not finished. It will get much, much worse before it gets better. We are but a third of the way through the Psalmist's complaint.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 15, 2024)

meditation 6— psalm 22.⁴⁻⁸

⁴Our fathers trusted You.

They trusted and You delivered them.

⁵They cried out to You, and they were delivered

They trusted You, and were not disappointed.

⁶But I am a nonentity, and less than human;

a human disgrace, whom many find repulsive.

⁷Everyone who sees me hisses at me.

They bare their teeth. They wag the head.

⁸“He has anticipated that YHWH would deliver him.

He should deliver him, then, seeing that He takes such pleasure in him” (author’s translation).

Psalm 22 begins with the devastating complaint,

“My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?

Why are You so far from helping me?

Why are You so far from my vigorous complaint?”

No matter how long and hard the Psalmist cries for help, God does not respond, but remains secure in the comfortable confines of His divine throne room as the Psalmist’s suffering continues. Given God’s past history of deliverance, the Psalmist is confused, perhaps angry. God’s inaction has an impact on others as well the Psalmist. The Psalmist’s enemies are emboldened as the ridicule him.

“Everyone who sees me hisses at me.

They bare their teeth. They wag the head.

“He has anticipated that YHWH would deliver him.

He should deliver him, then, seeing that He takes such pleasure in him.”

No doubt, in reminding God of his enemies’ boldness, the Psalmist hopes to move God to action. We have seen this strategy before. In another dark hour, the Psalmist pleaded,

“Pay attention! Respond to me, YHWH, my God.

Brighten my eyes, lest I sleep death’s sleep;

lest my enemy can boast, ‘I’ve defeated him!’

Lest my adversaries exalt because I succumb.”¹

We have even witnessed the Psalmist appeal to God’s own reputation as he pled for help.

“Rise up, YHWH, my God.

Strike out with Your power.

Do not abandon the downtrodden,

on which basis the malevolently immoral could hold ’ēlōhîm in contempt,

saying to themselves, “God doesn’t care.”²

Just as Jesus found in the psalm’s opening line an expression of his own experience and feelings of Divine abandonment, we might find in his enemies ridicule an echo of the ridicule the Psalmist’s enemies heaped upon him.

¹ Psalm 13.³⁻⁴

² Psalm 10.¹²⁻¹³

“They that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, and saying, ‘Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.’

Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, ‘He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, “I am the Son of God.”’³

“And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, ‘Ah, thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself, and come down from the cross.’

Likewise also the chief priests mocking said among themselves with the scribes, ‘He saved others; himself he cannot save. Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe.’⁴

“And the soldiers also mocked him... saying, ‘If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself...’ And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, ‘If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.’⁵

Now, it is possible, as we have noted previously, to read this echo as the fulfillment of a very specific ancient prophecy or prediction. We should perhaps expect that some may have been given intimations of the most important event in human history. At the same time, it is a sorry historical reality that many an individual who has expressed trust in God and his help have been ridiculed in much the same way that Jesus was. Ridiculers have accused many of guilt and charges of god-forsakenness. Even a cursory reading of the Psalms demonstrates that those who composed the Psalms, those who prayed the Psalms, and those who heard and witnessed the Psalms prayed were all too familiar, often intimately and personally so, with the ridicule of persecutors and enemies.

“How many are those who malign my character:
‘He’ll get no help from ’ēlohîm’!”⁶

“When my enemies speak out against me,
and those scrutinizing me plot together,
asserting: ‘God has forsaken him.
Pursue and seize him for he has no one to rescue him...’⁷

There is no telling how many innocent victims have died with the sort of ridicule we hear in this psalm ringing in their ears. There is no telling how many innocent victims of violence and murder were taunted in their final minutes with the assertion that their faith in God was wasted and vain. There is no telling how many innocent victims of violence and murder were taunted with the claim that their suffering was proof that they meant nothing to a God to whom they had offered a lifetime of devotion.

Neither is there any telling how many perpetrators of violent persecution and prosecution threw such taunts into the face of their victims to justify their own and their compatriots’ violence against their hated enemy.

Whatever one decides about prophecy and prediction, there need be no doubt that in Jesus’ experience of the prosecutor’s scorn suffered in his final hours, Jesus, as he had done throughout his short life,

³ Matthew 27.³⁹⁻⁴³

⁴ Mark 15.²⁹⁻³²

⁵ Luke 23.³⁶⁻³⁹

⁶ Psalms 3.²

⁷ Psalm 71.¹⁰⁻¹¹

demonstrated his unity with humankind, becoming one, especially, with so many innocent victims who had and would suffer unjustifiable indignity and hatred and violence.

My own faith is such that I can live without prediction. But I cannot live without God's attachment to me. I cannot live without the belief that His experiences and knowledge allow Him to understand me, know how to succor me, and know how to save me. All who have truly read or heard or prayed this twenty-second psalm have discovered such a God, with or without the idea of prediction.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 15, 2024)

meditation 7— psalm 22.⁹⁻¹⁰

⁹But You drew me from the womb.

You laid me on my mother's breast.

¹⁰I was given into Your care before birth.

From my mother's womb, You were my God (author's translation).

Notwithstanding the Psalmist's intense and continuous plea for help in the face of his enemies' humiliating and life-threatening attack, God has been unresponsive and inactive. The Psalmist has expressed his confusion over God's inaction (1-3). The natural confusion that might be expected of one who believes in God and believes him to be interested and caring toward them, is intensified in the Psalmist when he considers God's energetic and saving responses to dangers Israel has faced in its past. He has always delivered the nation (4-5).

What adds yet more to the confusion is the depth of the Psalmist's present suffering. He is humiliated. He is treated as something less than human. What's more, God's inaction has given the Psalmist's enemies justification for their persecution. God, they have concluded, doesn't care about the Psalmist. Indeed, the enemies' dismissal of the Psalmist's value loops back upon God, Himself. God is inactive. The enemy can do what they want without consequence. Does God not even care about His own reputation? (6-8)

As if all of this were not enough, what adds even more confusion is that the Psalmist has his own history with God. God watched over the Psalmist's development in his mother's womb. God looked after him at his birth, guaranteeing a safe and healthy delivery. God put him in the care of a loving and nurturing mother. God has always been there for him (9-10).

So, again, why is God absent? We can certainly feel for the Psalmist. Perhaps we too have felt abandoned, notwithstanding our pleas, our past experiences, and our expectations for the future. All we can say for now, is hang in there. The Psalm is not over yet. Perhaps we will come to understand. Perhaps God will yet act.

“Wait on the Lord,” the Psalmist's encourages. “Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart.”

“Wait, I say, on the Lord.”¹

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹ Psalm 27.¹⁴

- ¹¹Don't distance Yourself from me,
for the enemy is near, but there is no one to help.
- ¹²Intimidating bulls surround me.
Powerful bulls from Bāšān encircle me.
- ¹³They open their mouths against me,
lions, rending and roaring.
- ¹⁴Like water, my blood flows,
and all my bones are broken.
My heart becomes wax,
melted inside me.
- ¹⁵My strength is sapped dry, like fired pottery.
My tongue sticks to the top of my mouth.
and You have brought me to the brink of death.
- ¹⁶Wild dog's surround me.
A vicious pack encircles me.
They pierce my hands and feet.
- ¹⁷I can count all my bones.
They look, they stare back at me.
- ¹⁸They divvy up my clothes amongst themselves,
and throw lots for my clothing.
- ¹⁹But You, YHWH, don't be distant.
My Helper, rush to my assistance.
- ²⁰Rescue me from the sword.
Rescue me from the dog's power, solitary as I am.
- ²¹Deliver me from the lion's mouth.
Deliver me from the wild ox's horns, attacked as I am (author's translation).

Other than God, Himself, no subject occupies the Psalmist's attention more than his enemies, often identified as malevolently immoral. He knows no limit to the variety of ways that he describes them and their wickedness. But, few Psalms, if any, utilize more intense and disturbing language and imagery than this one. Indeed, the intensity and extreme nature of the language have led some to muse on the near demonic nature of the enemies and their attack upon the Psalmist. Whether it is demonic or not, it is certainly animalistic.

We have already heard the dehumanizing impact the enemy's attack had on the Psalmist personally. In these verses, he reveals that his enemies' hatred for and treatment of him demonstrates a yielding to a violent and unthinking animalistic spirit. This spirit has so powerfully taken over them that the Psalmist cannot limit himself to comparing them to just one animal. Instead, he likens them first, to a herd of rage-filled, charging bulls, then to a pride of lions hunched over their prey ripping flesh and crunching bones, then to a pack of wild dogs with gnashing teeth, biting the Psalmist and opening deep wounds, and then, finally, to a wild oxen that gores with its horns.

We can think of the Psalmist enemies as being extraordinary, or we can think of the Psalmist being extraordinarily sensitive to and perceptive of the nature of human enmity and the unthinking irrationality that takes over human beings who yield their bodies and souls to hatred, ridicule, and violence.

I have maintained often that Jesus' crucifixion was a revelation; that whatever it creates comes by means of the revelation. Jesus' crucifixion was meant, first and foremost to reveal the nature and character of God. But a close second revelation of the crucifixion was its revelation of human enmity and violence, the

danger of that enmity and violence escalating out of control, and the devastating, dehumanizing impact that enmity and violence have on their victims.

As we, all of us, observe the animalistic behavior of the Psalmist's enemies and look upon Jesus hanging on the cross, we look, as if into a mirror, upon our own faces. And we look into the face of victims. We not only see the lengths to which God will go to reveal and save humankind. We see the depths of depravity found in human enmity and violence and the devastation it brings to its victims. The revelation not only draws us to God, it drives us, disgusted and appalled, to abandon our conditioned human enmity and the violent impulses it sets in motion. It instills compassion for all victims, all the world's vulnerable.

It drives us to repent. To abandon the animalistic and adopt the divine.

There might have been any number of reasons for the Gospel writers and, indeed, Jesus himself to use and incorporate this Psalm into the crucifixion narrative. But certainly, this Psalm possesses the same revelation concerning the unthinking and animalistic nature of human violence Jesus' cross reveals. It reveals the same dehumanization of those victimized by unthinking and animalistic human enmity and violence. And though it is delayed in the Psalm, it draws us to God, the revelation of what true, exalted human nature looks and acts like, and the only power sufficient to implant something of the divine in the human heart and soul.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 15, 2024)

meditation 9— psalm 22.²²⁻²⁵

- ²²I will declare thy name unto my brethren:
in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee.
- ²³Ye that fear the LORD, praise him;
all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify him;
and fear him, all ye the seed of Israel.
- ²⁴For he hath not despised nor abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted;
neither hath he hid his face from him;
but when he cried unto him, he heard.
- ²⁵My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation:
I will pay my vows before them that fear him (author's translation).

Many years ago, I attended a “praise service” of another faith. I remember at the time being put off by all the talk and movement of “praise.” One reason for my dislike of what I saw and heard, I am sure, stemmed from the fact that my own LDS culture didn't talk or act like this. So, in a sense, my dislike of the praise movement was simply provincial and bigoted, evidence of my small-mindedness. But at the time, this was not part of my conscious thinking. I unconsciously covered up my small-mindedness with a justification that I now see was equally small-minded but which, at the time, seemed utterly reasonable. “What use and how legitimate is all this vocal praise when these people are not faithful in their daily lives; not living Gospel principles as I understand them and not holding a correct and proper view of God, his Being and Character?”

Of course, the errors in my judgements were legion. How did I know they were not faithful to God? Who said that faithfulness to God was contingent upon possessing and believing the dogmas I held to be so self-evident? How clearly, how fully does one need to “understand” the character and Being of God before one can be spoken of as “faithful”? What does it mean, anyway, to the “faithful”?

But, today, as I consider the Psalmist's message, I see that my small-mindedness extended no less toward God than it did to those worshipers of yesteryear. For even if I now grant that, like me, they were indeed not always as “faithful” to God as they might have been, I was the one without understanding of God.

I was the one denying his mercy. I was the one who created a God who, opposed to the Psalmist's, was offended by and highly energized against one who is humiliated—humiliated by weakness and sin. I was the “faithless” one in that I did not trust God with my weakness. Did not trust God with my sin. Did not trust God with my humiliation. I was the one who had invented a God who hid his face from the humiliation of others.

But God be praised. I finally learned to approach him, even in humiliation. But I only learned to so love him, because he first loved me and unquestionably manifested his love to me. So, consider this little meditation, today, as an example of me following so many—past, present, and future—in praising God. Let me follow the Psalmist's example.

“I... declare thy name unto my brethren:
in the midst of the congregation... I praise thee.”

Let me follow the admonition of Alma, the younger.

“Therefore, let us glory,
yea, we will glory in the Lord;

yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full;
yea, we will praise our God forever.
Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord?
Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy,
and of his long-suffering towards the children of men?
Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.”¹

Yea, let me follow the dictates of the Holy Spirit so that I can

“speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel.”²

Let mine be but one small voice among the multitudes of angels and the sanctified that kneel “before his throne, worshiping God, and the Lamb, which worship him forever and every.”³

Today, then, is as good a time as any to praise. That’s it.

“Hallûyah.

Praise YHWH from the heavens.

Praise YHWH from the highest of places.

Praise Him, all His divine messengers.

Praise Him, all His divine ministers.

Praise Him, sun and moon.

Praise Him, all glittering stars.

Praise Him, heaven’s skies,

and waters above the heavens.

Praise YHWH’s character

for only His character is unimaginably lofty.”⁴

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 15, 2024)

¹ Alma 26.¹⁶

² 2 Nephi 31.¹³

³ DC 76.²¹

⁴ Psalm 148.^{1-4, 13}

meditation 10— psalm 22.²⁶⁻³¹

- ²⁶The poor will eat and be full.
Those who search after YHWH will praise Him.
They are always enlivened.
- ²⁷The world over will acknowledge and come to YHWH.
People from every nation will bow down before you.
- ²⁸For kingship belongs to YHWH,
even rule over nations.
- ²⁹All the earth's robust will eat and worship him.
All who are descending into the grave will bow before him,
and he whose life is not preserved.
- ³⁰Descendants will serve Him.
My Lord will be spoken of for generations.
- ³¹They will come and declare His triumph
to a people yet to be born;
that it is he who acts (author's translation).

Our trip through Psalm 22 has been a wild ride. Notwithstanding his own and his nation's past happy experiences with God, the Psalmist has experienced God's absence and has been confused by it. Amid God's absence, the Psalmist's demented enemies have taken advantage of the Psalmist's vulnerability. They have surrounded, threatened, and attacked him mercilessly until he is a broken and spent shell of his former self.

Still, the Psalmist refuses to let go his faith and hope in the God he has known since birth. He continues to entreat the renowned God of Israel, asking to be delivered from his enemies. Suddenly, his prayers are answered. God has been watching after all. Undeterred by the Psalmist's humiliated and terrorized state, God somehow removes the Psalmist's enemies from the scene until they are little more than a distant memory.

Now, in today's reading, God is everywhere and everything. The Psalmist can't say enough about Him. He praises Him everywhere and to anyone who will listen. He invites others to join him. The Psalmist's vision is expanded so that he can now see beyond his own experiences. His own experiences, God's hand in his deliverance, and his praise of God, he sees, will impact broad swaths of humanity. The entire world will come to know God through the Psalmist's witness. Every nation will yield sovereignty to God through the Psalmist's witness. Both the living and the dead will worship God through the Psalmist's witness. Generations yet unborn will love and serve God through the Psalmist's testimony. I am counted as one of the multitude his witness has influenced and caused to trust in and praise God.

As I consider this psalm and the path it has taken, I think of two individuals. First, I think of Alma the younger. I am reminded of his experience of torment and deliverance. I am reminded of his commitment to serve God by witnessing of His great and delivering power.

“Yea, and from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.”²³

²³ Alma 36.²⁴

Alma's hope regarding the impact his witness would have on the world might not sound so grand and universal as that which the Psalmist expresses. Yet Alma's witness extended out through the generations until it reached out and grabbed me. His witness helped me understand of what God is capable. His witness was instrumental in helping me have the faith to invite God into my life of humiliation. His witness was instrumental in giving God entrance into my life to heal and redeem and renew. I am extraordinarily grateful for his witness.

Like John the Baptist who knew that there was one "preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose."²⁴ Alma knew that

"there be many things to come; and behold, there is one thing which is of more importance than they all—for behold, the time is not far distant that the Redeemer liveth and cometh among his people."²⁵

This brings us to the second person I think of when I read the Psalmist's witness. I too, like John and Alma, know that there is one far, far greater than either of them. I do not confuse the servants for the master. Jesus suffered much as the Psalmist's suffered. God delivered him from something far, far worse than that which the Psalmist suffered. God delivered him from enemies far, far more powerful than the Psalmist's enemies. Jesus' witness of God reaches far, far beyond that of the Psalmist. Far, far beyond the witness of John or Alma. Indeed, we cannot comprehend just how far and wide it might extend. But, Paul informs us, as the Psalmists intimates, that

"at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."²⁶

Yes, Jesus' witness of his Father is the greatest, the brightest, the truest witness of God the world has ever seen. Even in that great day when we bow the knee and confess that Jesus Christ is Master, we will sense him looking up and hear him utter his own heartfelt witness.

"Glory be to the Father."²⁷

And then, truly everyone "will come and declare His triumph!"

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 15, 2024)

²⁴ John 1.²⁷

²⁵ Alma 7.⁷

²⁶ Philippians 2.¹⁰⁻¹¹

²⁷ DC 19.¹⁹

Psalms 22.¹— meditation

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me

My LDS faith tradition places a high value on the Old Testament Book of Isaiah. There are several likely reasons for this. The first that comes to mind is that the tradition, like the Jewish and Christian traditions, can generally appreciate his²⁸ inspired insights and beautiful poetry. His language, his thought, and his hope for the future of Israel are as inspiring as that of any Hebrew prophet, all of whom can dazzle with their poetry and insights.

Most LDS people, like much of Christianity, believe that Isaiah received clear revelations about the character and life of Jesus of Nazareth. The justifications for this belief seem exaggerated. The passages often referenced can easily be otherwise interpreted. Still, the idea that Isaiah prophesied of Jesus comes from the earliest periods of Christian history. In addition to Christian traditional, the LDS reader might find added justification for this view in the Book of Mormon. Here, the Book's first author, Nephi, says, "Now I, Nephi, write more of the words of Isaiah, for my soul delighteth in his words... for he verily saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him."²⁹

As authoritative as Nephi's recommendation of the Book is, the Book of Mormon possesses a far more authoritative recommendation of Isaiah. This recommendation comes from none other than Jesus, the resurrected Lord himself. Actually, it is a bit more than "recommendation." It takes the form of "commandment."

"And now, behold, I say unto you, that ye ought to search these things. Yea, a commandment I give unto you that ye search these things diligently; for great are the words of Isaiah."³⁰

There are no doubt other reasons for the high value that LDS culture and thought places on the Book of Isaiah. But these will suffice for the purposes of this meditation. If Jesus' "book recommendations" carry such weight, it is a wonder that another Old Testament book is so thoroughly ignored in LDS culture, thought, and theology. That Book is... you guessed it... the Book of Psalms.

There is perhaps no Old Testament Book more influential in Jewish and Christian culture, worship, and thought than Psalms.³¹ No other Old Testament Book has been translated or commented on more often. It is a rare Sabbath or Sunday on which Jewish and Christian congregations alike do not hear a psalm read, sang, prayed, or commented upon.

Again, there are many reasons for the Psalms' influence. Like the Book of Isaiah, the poetry of the Book

²⁸ Most scholars see at least three different authors in this one Book, in which case we might speak of they/ them/ their.

²⁹ 2 Nephi 11.² Even if such a statement is taken quite literally, it does not mean that such "seeing" found its way into Isaiah's text as we have it.

³⁰ 3 Nephi 23.¹

³¹ One can argue that Torah, in the case of Judaism, or the Gospels, in the case of Christianity is just as influential in these cultures, their worship, thought, and theology. Fair enough. But Torah and the Gospels are composed on five and four separate books respectively. No one of them is any more influential or frequently read, quoted, translated, prayed, sang, and commented on in Jewish or Christian culture than the Book of Psalms.

of Psalms is beautiful and insightful. The Book captures the human experience, especially the human spiritual experience like no other. It is difficult to image a theology (characterization of God and His nature) or expressions of trust in God that are more moving and incline the heart of the reader more toward God than those found in Psalms.

Though, as in the case of Isaiah, the assertions seem often exaggerated and strained, Christian tradition finds in the Book of Psalms numerous allusions to Jesus of Nazareth.³² The Book is the New Testament's most oft quoted Old Testament book. Jesus himself both quotes from and alludes to it on several occasions. Indeed, Jesus finds himself in it. Having appeared to two dejected disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus taught them,

“These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, *and in the psalms*, concerning me.’

Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, And said unto them, ‘Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.’”³³

Now is not the time to explore all that Jesus might or might not have meant in this quote. We can say, though, that in the Psalms' innocent sufferers an innocent Jesus found someone he could relate to and who in some fashion pointed to him and his experiences.

Just as Jesus' recommendation of Isaiah has weighted heavily on LDS appreciation for Isaiah, one would think that his recommendation of Psalms would cause a gravitational pull toward the Psalms in LDS culture, thought, theology, worship, etc. Unfortunately, and sadly, maybe even tragically, it has not. The Book of Psalms has garnered about as much attention as Leviticus or the Song of Solomon, which is to say, microscopic. It is, to me, one of the great mysteries of Mormonism. Its ignorance of the Psalms is responsible to some degree for weakness in its theology and a loss to its spirituality.

Now, it is true that LDS culture does not possess the love and respect for the Bible that it does for its own Book of Mormon. Now is not the time to address this weakness either. But it might go at least a little way toward explaining why Jesus' recommendation of Isaiah seems to have held more sway than his recommendation of Psalms, the former coming from the more respected Book of Mormon, the latter from the oft-maligned Bible.

But, even so. The LDS faith claims to be fully centered in Jesus Christ and his atonement. To speak of “Jesus” is often viewed as insufficiently respectful—or is it just too intimate? Anyway, Jesus is more often than not called, “Jesus Christ.” When it comes to (the) atonement, the faith likes to capitalize it: the “Atonement,” though this is not the practice in scripture. The atonement is seen as having been “wrought” from the Garden of Gethsemane, to Calgary, to the Garden Tomb, to the resurrection and ascension. What does all of this have to do with the Psalms?

In the midst of perhaps the greatest drama in world or universal history; in the midst of Jesus' greatest moments of suffering, pain, and anguish; in the midst of a pain, stress, and need so intense than any other would have been annihilated both physically and spiritually under the anguish of it all; in the moments

³² The allegorical reading of scripture, so dominate in the history of Christian Biblical interpretation, has been especially energetic in finding Christ and Christianity in the Psalms. Many of these “findings” seem to me, anyway, highly fanciful, often doing profound violence to the plain meaning of the text.

³³ Luke 24.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁷

upon which all eternity and all human endurance hung—Jesus chose the words of the Psalmist to express his deepest feelings.

“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.”

The greatest person to inhabit this planet offered one of the greatest prayers ever offered and used the Psalms to do so! Could there be any stronger recommendation of the Book of Psalms? I think not. Should this recommendation be ignored? Absolutely not. If the beauty of the Book, its universal application to human experience, and its unparalleled witness of God, His character, and His devotion to humanity is not enough recommendation for the LDS people, then let Jesus and his reliance on the Psalms in his and humanity’s darkest hour be sufficient to bring them to a greater appreciation, love, and respect for one of the most inspired and influential pieces of literature and spirituality in human history.

Not for nothing did Luther refer to the Book of Psalms as “the Little Bible.” It has everything. It can direct and improve our prayers. It can direct and improve our lives. It warns of the dangers and evils of this world and how to overcome them. It holds out hope for a better world and future. Perhaps most of all it offers glimpses into God and His unmatched character better than anywhere in scripture outside the New Testament Gospels, where God and His character are more clearly and intimately revealed than anywhere in scripture. This clear and intimate revelation is found in the person of Jesus. The same Jesus, who lived and loved the Psalms; who found comfort and expression in the Psalms; who relied upon the Psalms in his most difficult moment; who prayed the Psalms in one of the universe’s ugliest and most redeeming moments throughout time and space.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: November 17, 2024)