

### **“He Has Done It” – Psalm 22 – Oct 14, 2012**

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” What is the first image that comes to your mind when you hear these familiar words? “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Most probably you, like almost every other Christian, immediately think of Jesus upon the cross in the final moments before he died.

And when we stop for a moment and think about hearing those words, I’m pretty sure that most Christians are at least a bit uncomfortable. The popular understanding, and by “popular” I mean the most common understanding of these words within the church over centuries, the popular understanding is that Jesus somehow felt abandoned by God; that somehow the connection between God and Christ had been stretched to a minutely thin fibre, with Jesus on the deep and dark edge of disbelief.

Of course, we’re not the only ones who are uncomfortable with this idea that somehow Jesus felt abandoned, discarded, thrown away by a God who didn’t care about him. Theologians and preachers over the ages have wriggled and twisted and turned into pretzels trying to explain how this could be. ‘Solutions’ abound: Jesus didn’t really know what he was saying; Jesus knew what he was saying, but it was only a temporary lapse; those who were there didn’t quite hear him accurately; the real words have been lost in translation – the list is almost endless of ways to get around the apparent problem that Jesus seemed to have lost faith. And we are made even more uncomfortable with that, because if Jesus lost faith in God, what hope is there for us?

I often feel like a salmon swimming upstream, because I often have a different take on both the events in scripture and the way those events were recorded than most people. For example, here I believe that these words uttered by Jesus on the cross were most definitely not words of despair and unbelief, but instead were words meant by Jesus to convey exactly the opposite. Follow me through, and see if my position not only makes some sense, but also brings to us a word of grace from scripture that seems to have been either lost or subdued across the ages.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Where else do we – did we – hear these very words just this morning? Yes, of course, they are the opening words to Psalm 22. Now if we had strictly followed the lectionary, we would have had our negative and depressing understanding reinforced. The first half of Psalm 22 – right down to verse 18 – goes on to elaborate the troubles being experienced by the one who wrote the psalm, and echoed by all those who repeat the psalm in worship.

But – and this is a crucial ‘but’ – how many of you (without looking) can tell me how the last half of the psalm sounds? Even people who know that the words Jesus uttered in his agony on the cross come from the opening of Psalm 22 tend not to know that the psalm transitions at verse 19 through a plea for help from God, and goes on to the end with a paean of praise for God and a proclamation that “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.” The psalm ends with the affirmation, 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.” “He has done it.” “Delivered a people yet unborn”, that is.

When I hear that, when I read the entire psalm and the abounding message of hope and rescue and deliverance of all people by God, I am moved to believe that Jesus did not utter those opening words as a protest of failure and unbelief, but as a shorthand pointer to those around him of the deliverance about to happen.

You see, his faithful followers standing around him, hearing his final words of agony, would have known this psalm in its entirety, unlike many or even most people today. We have our favourite psalms; we can possibly even recite one or two, like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm (“The Lord is my shepherd...”), but I have met hardly anyone who remembers the last half of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. And knowing that those around him who could hear him utter those few words with his last struggling breaths would know the psalm in its entirety, can you not agree with me that Jesus would expect his hearers to hear not just the words that sound like a faith failure but would instead – as I believe he hoped – hear the promise of rescue, hope, and deliverance in this painful act?

Note that both Mark and Matthew, gospel writers with a deep Jewish historical background and context, include these words, knowing also that their contemporary readers would also know the psalm in its entirety and hear the same words of reassurance instead of abandonment. Luke and John, writing into a different context and to different audiences could not expect such familiarity, and do not echo the words that are troublesome to Gentile ears. The message in the psalm, the message to which I believe Jesus was pointing his followers, was the message of God’s greatness and goodness. Far from his own death being a disaster, the end of the goodness, the psalm proclaims the message of how God’s kingdom will eventually embrace all the earth. I believe Jesus was – in a shorthand introduction to this psalm – hoping we would understand and hear the message of triumph. “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.” Far from being a message of God’s abandonment or that death is the victor, we are assured that “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.” “He has done it” ... the deliverance is already given.

So, does that change things for you just a bit? It does for me. Instead of wrestling with trying – unsuccessfully – to wriggle around and come up with an explanation for how Jesus might have lost faith in God, what I hear instead is the exact opposite – an affirmation that even in the most serious of times of trouble we, like Jesus, can count on being rescued by God. Not a promise that life will be all roses and champagne, but a deep, profound, delivered promise of deliverance by God where and when it counts.

I think we all have times of trouble that challenge us deeply. Times when the sentiments of the first part of Psalm 22 echo in our own minds, wondering why God is letting us be subject to such woes, feeling beset upon from all directions by life and the unpleasant times that face us. Those are the times that we need most urgently to hear the second half of the psalm – the part to which I am convinced that Jesus was pointing his followers – the part that proclaims and echoes words of assurance. “From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.” We all have our own variations of wild oxen to deal with, and so the proclamation can be ours that God will, indeed already has (“he has done it”) delivered us from our problems, and even ourselves.

What else then can we learn from being reminded of the assurance of already-delivered deliverance in the last half of Psalm 22? Just as the psalmist declares that God has rescued her or him, the first response from the one rescued is a promise to proclaiming that declaration far and wide. “I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” begins the promise of announcing salvation. And lest we fall into the trap of thinking that it is only the good, the pure, the clean, the noble who will receive the Lord’s favour, the psalmist reminds us, “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.” The psalmist has not only not been abandoned by God but has been rescued, and vows now to proclaim the saving grace of God to all people, and the implication seems pretty clear that we, having also been rescued and redeemed by the grace of God in Christ also bear the responsibility of proclaiming God’s greatness and goodness to all. These praises should properly be heard both in the great congregation and in the world at large. The praise is to be delivered both in speech and in action – “the poor shall eat and be satisfied.”

Hopefully now when you again hear those words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” you might hear not words of abandonment and despair but instead a pointer to the whole message, a message of rescue and redemption, of the grace of God, the he in “he has done it.” May God grant us the wisdom to understand and the grace to respond in praise.