

A Cry of Victory

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani

Among Jesus' words from the cross was the phrase, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*" The words means, "My God, my God, why have your forsaken me?" But what did Jesus means as He quoted these words fro Psalm 22:1? To find the answer, says renowned Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke, don't stop at Psalm 22:1- keep reading to the end.



All England waited to here the outcome of Wellington's battle with Napoleon at Waterloo in 1812. After the battle, a light signal flashed across the English Channel, from France to England, reading, "Wellington defeated....," whereupon a fog settled over the Channel. That message quickly spread throughout Britain, throwing its citizens into despair. But when the fog lifted, the full message was seen: "Wellington defeated the enemy."

In a similar sense, our Lord's cry from the cross, "My god, why have your forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34, NIV) can be perceived as a most disturbing cry- or as a most comforting word. Jesus was actually quoting from Psalm 22. And when we look at that psalm in its entirety, we need to ask ourselves, did God really abandon His only Son? Or could it be that our Savior was identifying with us in our sufferings and giving voice to our own feelings of being abandoned by God?

The advisers for the Visual Bible are now debating whether Jesus' question is real (that is, expecting an answer) or rhetorical (that is, venting His feelings of loneliness). Some advisers argue that Jesus' question expresses His realization that His mission to establish the kingdom of God failed. Others, of whom I am one, argue that Jesus' question is rhetorical, for it must be interpreted in the light of the whole psalm. If read in that light, His question can offer great comfort to suffering believers.

The psalm should be read within three historical horizons: David's, our Lord's and ours. Regarding the first two horizons, David describes his own passion in extreme language that finds a remarkable literal fulfillment in our Lord's passions upon the cross. No other psalm fists so aptly the circumstances of Jesus at His crucifixion. This is more remarkable because crucifixion is a Roman form of execution, not a Jewish one (which would have been stoning). The insults hurled at the sufferer (Psalm 22:7) are those the truly righteous Sufferer endured from the hypocritical priests (Matthew 27:41-44); the evil men surrounding Him pierce His hands and His feet, as occurs in crucifixion (Psalm 22:16; John 20:25-27), and they divide His clothes among them and cast lots for His garments, which are probably events unique to Jesus' Passion (Matthew 27:35; John 19:23-24).

But the Bible indicates that Psalm 22 applies not only to Jesus' death but also to His resurrection. In fact, the writer of Hebrews cites a verse later in Psalm 22-vers 22-as also being the words of Christ (Hebrews 2:12). In other words, Jesus meditated upon this entire psalm, not just the first verse, during the many hours of His suffering on the cross, and His cry of feeling abandoned must be interpreted in light of the hope and praise that draws the psalm to its conclusion. The psalm's amazing prophetic portrayal

of our lord's suffering on the cross assures us that God foreordained Jesus' crucifixion and that His mission did not fail.

The Spirit, through David, uttered this psalm not only as a prophecy of our Lord's Passion but also to give voice to our passions, through the details are as figurative for us as they were for David. David handed over this passion psalm to the musician in charge of temple music to represent feelings of loneliness and abandonment that all believers suffer.

C.S. Lewis likened his own experience of grief, as he prayed for his dying wife, to knocking on the door of heaven, hoping God would open it and hear his cry. Lewis, like some of us, knocked until his knuckles were raw, but when he examined it more closely the door seemed double-bolted. This feeling of being abandoned is common to the Christian experience (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). But Psalm 22, while giving voice to our feelings of abandonment, in fact gives voice to our confidence in death and to our assured praise that transcends death.

Let us consider in more detail this Spirit-inspired meditation that sustained David and our Lord-and that can sustain us when we feel most alone. The psalm is highly symmetrical. Apart from a transition in verse 11, the poem consists of three ten-verse stanzas (verses 1-10, 12-21, 22-31), and each stanza is also symmetrical. This balanced structure expresses calm and composure-not anxiety- in spite of crisis. The first stanza (verses 1-10) contains two sections of equal length, each of which combines lament with confidence. In the first section (verses 1-5), the psalmist overcomes his feeling of abandonment by God (verse 1-2). He does this by reminding himself how God delivered his ancestors (verse 3-5, NIV): "In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them." In the second section (verse 6-10), he overcomes his feelings of abandonment by humankind. He does this by remembering God's past faithfulness to him: "Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast" (NIV).

The second stanza (verses 12-21) matches his passion (verses 12-18) with his petition (verses 19-21). He shows poise and clear thinking by taking key elements from his lament-bulls, lions, dogs and sword-and exactly reversing their order in his petition. This careful structure implies that even in his suffering he has a sense of control and composure, not chaos and despair. In this stanza we also find the most striking promises about our Lord's Passion-prophecies that assure us that God foreordained Christ's crucifixion and that His mission did not fail.

The third stanza (verse 22-31) brings the psalm to its triumphant climax of praise after his deliverance from death. It too consists of two units of equal length. In the first (verses 22-26) he calls upon his brothers to join him in praise: "He has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one" (verse 24, NIV). In the second (verses 27-31) he foresees "all the ends of the earth" in space (verse 27-29, NIV) for future generation in time (verses 30-31) giving testimony to what God has done in raising him from the grave, a prophecy that is being fulfilled this month as we remember our lord's death and resurrection.

Without understanding the beautiful link between prophetic Old Testament passages and their corresponding New Testament realities, we run the risk of premature hopelessness similar to that of the British citizens after Wellington's successful battle. If

we stop reading Psalm 22 at verse 1 or even verse 18-Good Friday- then Jesus' cry from the cross heralds His defeat, and we will be cast into despair. But if we hear His cry as part of His meditation of the entirety of Psalm 22, and the full message of Easter Sunday, His cry consoles us.

Bruce Waltke. "A Cry of Victory." *Decision*. (April 2004): 14-15.