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**Psalm 22:1**, English Standard Version.

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

**Matthew 27:46**, English Standard Version.

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

**Grab yourself a Psalm.**

A lot of people over the centuries have wondered why it is that Jesus exclaimed *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* just before his death on the cross. It is widely believed that most of his contemporaries believed that Jesus was sent by God to build a new Jewish empire on Earth. The people who laid down palms for him as he rode a donkey into Jerusalem yelled: *“Hosana!”* which means “Save us now”. The word “now” is critical. Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem didn’t understand that Jesus was about to die, that he wasn’t going to build a new Jerusalem on Earth. His goal was to build a Kingdom of God, not a Kingdom of people. If Jesus knew that he was indeed the Messiah and not an earthly king, if he knew that he was God himself, why on Earth would he proclaim *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* Surely, he knew that he was not forsaken by God.

Surely, he knew that as soon as he died, even though he would suffer horribly first, he would be just fine. We might explain this away by arguing that Jesus fell to his human side, that he had an emotional collapse, that part of his coming to Earth as a man meant that in his last moments, he would be very human, very frail.

But there is another explanation as to why Jesus uttered these specific words, quoted from the first line of Psalm 22. First, we should note that in the Gospel of Matthew alone, Jesus quotes what we call the Old Testament at least ten times; some people count many more Old Testament quotes by Jesus in Matthew. The point is that Jesus was a Jew. Hebrew Scripture was well known to him. That's why we see him quoting Deuteronomy, Exodus, Genesis, the Psalms, and other Old Testament Books. He often reinforces a point by referencing literature well known to those around him.

Before we look at Psalm 22, here's something to keep in mind. Hebrew poetry does not rhyme in English – and in fact, it does not rhyme in Hebrew. And while English poetry is engineered around sounds, Hebrew poetry is structured around thoughts or ideas, not sounds. Now, let's look at Psalm 22, the first line of which Jesus utters while dying on the cross. Psalm 22 is in a series of Psalms, 21 to 31, that offer comfort when dealing with terrible situations. They assure us of God's steadfast love and empathy. They help us obtain serenity during troubled

times. Many people consider Psalm 22 to be a prophesy of the crucifixion. The first four stanzas are a call for help. This covers the first 11 verses. Then the Psalmist grows desperate. The Psalmist is cornered, encircled by evil. Death will come, surely. But then, the Psalm becomes glorious in its tone. The Psalmist turns his thoughts to other people and not just himself. He prays that others will be rescued, that it won't be just him who is relieved of his affliction. The Psalmist prays that all people will become people of God and will be delivered from all that makes them suffer. Here is a highly abridged form of the Psalm:

- <sup>1</sup> *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?*
- <sup>2</sup> *O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,  
and by night, but I find no rest.*
- <sup>3</sup> *Yet you are holy,  
enthroned on the praises of Israel.*
- <sup>4</sup> *In you our fathers trusted;*
- <sup>5</sup> *To you they cried and were rescued;*
- <sup>6</sup> *But I am a worm and not a man,  
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.*
- <sup>13</sup> *they open wide their mouths at me,  
like a ravening and roaring lion.  
you lay me in the dust of death.*
- <sup>16</sup> *For dogs encompass me;  
a company of evildoers encircles me;  
they have pierced my hands and feet—*
- <sup>18</sup> *they divide my garments among them,  
and for my clothing they cast lots.*

- 19 But you, O LORD, do not be far off!  
O you my help, come quickly to my aid!*
- 21 Save me from the mouth of the lion!  
You have rescued me!*
- 23 You who fear the LORD, praise him!*
- 24 For he has not despised or abhorred  
the affliction of the afflicted,  
and he has not hidden his face from him,  
but has heard, when I cried to him.*
- 27 All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the LORD,  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before you.*
- 28 For kingship belongs to the LORD,  
and he rules over the nations.*
- 31 they shall come and proclaim his righteousness.*

So, the argument that many have made is that by quoting just the first line of this Psalm, Jesus is invoking the entire Psalm – which his followers would certainly know. Jesus knows that in times of great suffering, God will do what God always does – and that is come to our aid. God will always listen. God will give us peace no matter how we are suffering. We are so confident of this, in fact, that we pray that all people everywhere come to embrace God.

Psalms is a very long book, and in fact, it is typically broken into five smaller “books”. It’s not known why the Book of Psalms was broken into five books. The division is not based on authorship or chronology. There have been attempts at

making these five groups logical, by pointing out that Book 4 consists mostly of Worship Psalms, Book 5 is mostly about Worship and Praise, Books 2 and 3 are mostly national in nature, and the Psalms in Book 1 are mostly personal. Another guess is that the five books of the Psalms correspond loosely in spiritual focus to the five books of the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. But the divisions seem to be more arbitrary than that, and so, we'll ignore them. The only real point we need to make is that the 5 divisions are quite ancient. The Psalms themselves, however, can be broken into the following categories, which do *not* correspond to the 5 Books: Praise, otherwise known as hymns; Lament, which are prayers offered to God during difficult times; Thanksgiving, which are similar to praise, but talk specifically about God's goodness, and often tell stories about prayers that have been answered; Confidence, which describe the author's trust in God; Kingship, each of which focuses on a specific Israelite King or God as King; Remembrance, which tell us about the history of God's presence on Earth; and Wisdom, which are similar in focus to the Proverbs or the content of Ecclesiastes. Depending on our situation, we might want to do what Jesus did, and that is turn to a Psalm whenever we are at a turning point in life, in a moment of crisis, or in a moment of reflection.

These categories can help us find an appropriate Psalm. There are many good commentaries that categorize and summarize the 150 Psalms.

Some of the Psalms are attributed to King David. We do not know if he truly wrote them. Let's look at one of the shorter ones that are said to be written by him. Psalm 142 tells us what to do when we feel that that we are not understood or appreciated. This Psalm tells us that no one knows us any better than God, and so that's who we should turn to for validation. God is always there, listening, and prepared to help. God wants a relationship with us. Here is Psalm 142:

*<sup>1</sup> I cry out to the LORD;  
I plead for the LORD's mercy.*

*<sup>2</sup> I pour out my complaints before him  
and tell him all my troubles.*

*<sup>3</sup> When I am overwhelmed,  
you alone know the way I should turn.  
Wherever I go,  
my enemies have set traps for me.*

*<sup>4</sup> I look for someone to come and help me,  
but no one gives me a passing thought!  
No one will help me;  
no one cares a bit what happens to me.*

*<sup>5</sup> Then I pray to you, O LORD.  
I say, "You are my place of refuge.  
You are all I really want in life.*

*<sup>6</sup> Hear my cry,  
for I am very low.  
Rescue me from my persecutors,  
for they are too strong for me.*

*<sup>7</sup> Bring me out of prison  
so I can thank you.  
The godly will crowd around me,  
for you are good to me.”*

Let’s consider another short one: Psalm 67. It’s prayer of blessing, asking God to shine his face upon us. This Psalm tells us joyously that God is just, and that God will guide all people. The word *Selah*, by the way, probably calls for a break in the singing of the Psalm – but we really do not know what the word means.

*<sup>1</sup> May God be merciful and bless us.  
May his face smile with favor on us.  
Selah*

*<sup>2</sup> May your ways be known throughout the earth,  
your saving power among people everywhere.*

*<sup>3</sup> May the nations praise you, O God.  
Yes, may all the nations praise you.*

*<sup>4</sup> Let the whole world sing for joy,  
because you govern the nations with justice  
and guide the people of the whole world.  
Selah*

*<sup>5</sup> May the nations praise you, O God.  
Yes, may all the nations praise you.*

*<sup>6</sup> Then the earth will yield its harvests,  
and God, our God, will richly bless us.*

*<sup>7</sup> Yes, God will bless us,  
and people all over the world will fear him.*

Let’s look at a piece of a longer Psalm, number 119. These lines honor God as the creator of the laws that we follow – laws that are more important than the laws

of humans. In this segment, the Psalmist proclaims that by living in accordance with the laws of God and by turning away from the things of this world, we will find true, joyful life.

*<sup>33</sup> Teach me your decrees, O LORD;  
I will keep them to the end.*

*<sup>34</sup> Give me understanding and I will obey your instructions;  
I will put them into practice with all my heart.*

*<sup>35</sup> Make me walk along the path of your commands,  
for that is where my happiness is found.*

*<sup>36</sup> Give me an eagerness for your laws  
rather than a love for money!*

*<sup>37</sup> Turn my eyes from worthless things,  
and give me life through your word.*

*<sup>38</sup> Reassure me of your promise,  
made to those who fear you.*

*<sup>39</sup> Help me abandon my shameful ways;  
for your regulations are good.*

*<sup>40</sup> I long to obey your commandments!  
Renew my life with your goodness.*

It's not that long until Easter. One thing to think about between now and then is that when Jesus was dying on the cross, he didn't have the human energy to sing out an entire Psalm. But he gave us the first line of a Psalm to tell us what he had to say to God the Father at that moment in time, and it was a message of desperation, but also salvation. If it's good enough for Jesus, it should be good enough for us. When we're in need of communicating directly with God, to ask for healing, a release from anxiety, forgiveness for having done something



horrible, or to express our thankfulness for God's promise of joy here on Earth and for all of eternity, we can turn to the Psalms as a source of stunning prayers. Most of what I have read to you today, by the way, comes from the *New Living Translation*, which many people find easier to read. However, some of the traditional lines that we all know are translated differently, and so there are times when a more traditional translation might feel better.

I'd like to finish with a piece of a Psalm that I often offer up. It's a prayer of strength. I say it when I am facing something challenging, something scary. I offer these two lines from the beginning of Psalm 62 when I need God's reassurance that no matter what happens, I am going to be just fine. I offered these lines up when our first child, Martina, was born, and she was in some medical danger:

*<sup>1</sup> I wait quietly before God,  
for my victory comes from him.  
<sup>2</sup> He alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress where I will never be shaken.*

The next time you need to talk to God, grab yourself a Psalm.

*Amen.*