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Psalm 22:1, English Standard Version.

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

Matthew 27:45-47, English Standard Version.

⁴⁵ *At noon, darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock.* ⁴⁶ *At about three o'clock, Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" which means "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"*

⁴⁷ *Some of the bystanders misunderstood and thought he was calling for the prophet Elijah.*

Who is he?

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.

We've talked about the fact that many have argued that by quoting just the first line of this Psalm, Jesus is invoking the entire Psalm, which starts out sounding very desperate and hopeless, but later in the Psalm, we read this:

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.

We see that by quoting the first line of this Psalm, Jesus might well be communicating the fact that he has not given up hope, he knows that God the Father has not abandoned him – and in fact, Jesus wants us to know that God always answers when we call. God will hear. We will be rescued – no matter how gruesome our situation may be. We remember that this Psalm was intimately familiar to those believers and to Jews who were within earshot of Jesus as he lay dying on the cross – and that includes us. In fact, that Psalm continues with this:

*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.

We see that Jesus not only knew that he was not alone, that God had not abandoned him, he knew that God is dependable. As a result, Jesus wants us to know that like him, we – and all the peoples of the world – should proclaim God's righteousness to all who are within earshot. It was very common for Jesus, as well as Paul the Great Evangelist, to communicate complex ideas simply by referencing Old Testament Scripture. He might well have been doing this here.

But there's another interesting aspect about this passage from Matthew, where Jesus cries out on the cross. As he says this line, there are people who apparently, mistakenly, believe that Jesus is saying something different, that he isn't reciting a Psalm: ⁴⁷ *Some of the bystanders misunderstood and thought he was calling for the prophet Elijah.* I won't get caught up in the details of translating Jesus' Aramaic to Greek in the New Testament, and then to English in New Testament translations, but the ESV says this:

⁴⁵ *At noon, darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock.* ⁴⁶ *At about three o'clock, Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" which means "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"*

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We are told that when Jesus says "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*, which means "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?", there are people who think he is saying, "Elijah, Elijah, why are you abandoning me?" To be precise, Eli means "God", not "My God". But that's a minor issue. The real point is that because Jesus is under great duress while in agony on the cross, his voice might not be very clear, and people might think he is calling out for Elijah. But, if his voice is hard to understand, why would people somehow tend to think he is saying "Elijah"? Why Elijah?

Here's some background. Elijah prophesied in the 800's B.C., and he served under King Ahab. Ahab's queen was the notorious Jezebel, who was a pagan and

encouraged other Israelites to turn away from God. At extreme risk to his life, Elijah led an effort to counter Jezebel's efforts. Elijah ended up going into the Judean wilderness to die when he believes he has failed at revitalizing the faith of his fellow Israelites. But God tells him that he has been successful: Elijah has ensured that a core of Israelites, 7,000 people, which is a number that represents perfection, have been saved from paganism. Against incredible odds, Elijah has courageously saved his people from descending into paganism. And importantly, Elijah does not die. He ascends into Heaven, just as Jesus would do hundreds of years later. This is what we are told in 2nd Kings. Elisha, by the way, would succeed Elijah as prophet:

⁷ Fifty men from the group of prophets went and watched from a distance as Elijah and Elisha stopped beside the Jordan River. ⁸ Then Elijah folded his cloak together and struck the water with it. The river divided, and the two of them went across on dry ground!

⁹ When they came to the other side, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I can do for you before I am taken away."

And Elisha replied, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit and become your successor."

¹⁰ "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah replied. "If you see me when I am taken from you, then you will get your request. But if not, then you won't."

¹¹ As they were walking along and talking, suddenly a chariot of fire appeared, drawn by horses of fire. It drove between the two men, separating them, and Elijah was carried by a whirlwind into heaven.

The Book of Malachi, the last book of our Old Testament, ends with this statement: *⁵ "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their*

children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” Many have taken these words to mean that Elijah’s powers will persist long after his death, and in fact, until the end of time. I am not convinced that this is a correct interpretation of his words, but certainly, people over the centuries have concluded that Elijah is like Jesus in this regard.

In sum, many of the people surrounding Jesus when he died were well aware of who Elijah was - a great prophet who was in many ways associated with Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew, John the Baptist is imprisoned by Herod, and then Herod has John the Baptist beheaded. This is what Jesus says about John the Baptist:

“I tell you the truth, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John the Baptist. ¹³ Before John came, all the prophets and the law of Moses looked forward to this present time. ¹⁴ And if you are willing to accept what I say, he is Elijah, the one the prophets said would come.

Jesus says that John the Baptist is Elijah or that John is as great as Elijah. This statement is important. In Jewish Scripture, Elijah is said to be someone who would come just before the Messiah would come to save the Israelite people. This is what we read in the Gospel of Matthew, but the people surrounding Jesus as he lay dying on the cross would not know this – because the Gospel had not yet been written.

Many the people standing around Jesus and who thought that he was calling out for Elijah didn’t know who he was! Consider who was at the cross when Jesus

died. Mary, his mother, Mary of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, two criminals, who were crucified, Roman soldiers, chief priests and Jewish leaders, some of his own disciples, and a large number of unnamed people. Most of them did not know that they were seeing the Savior dying. Some of the people who yelled out that he was calling for Elijah knew that Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah, and they were probably mocking him. If they were familiar with Jewish Scripture and knew that Elijah was supposed to usher in the Messiah, they would have been taunting him, saying “Hey, Elijah can’t help you, you fool!” Many other people were probably struggling to figure out what was going on. They might have thought that since Jesus was shouting out for the one who was supposed to open a path for him, Jesus was wrong about himself: Elijah hadn’t come and so Jesus was not the Messiah.

Here is the real point. Of all the people standing around the cross at the time that Jesus was crucified, only a small handful were fully convinced that he was the Messiah. Even those people were likely to not understand that he wasn’t an Earthly Messiah. As recently as his ride on a donkey into Jerusalem, the people laying down palm branches for him were yelling, *“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”* Hosanna means “Save us now!” At the end of his life, his followers, those who believed in him, thought he was going to push the Roman Empire aside and create a new Jewish theocracy.

Let's pause. This is Good Friday. Jesus is hanging on the cross. He is dying slowly, in agony. He is using the last of his strength to lift his torso up with his feet so that his lungs can fill with air. His shoulders have quite likely been dislocated. He is moments from death. He cries out in a partially inaudible voice: *"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"* which means *"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"* Some of the people around him are mocking him. Others are confused, trying to figure out who he is, why he is calling for the one who is supposed to come before him, why he hasn't destroyed the Roman Empire. But we are blessed. As we stand here today at the foot of the cross, we know what he said. We know who he is. We know what kind of kingdom he has brought into the cosmos, a kingdom of empathy, love, peace, forgiveness, and kindness – offered to all people by God and by us. Jesus is God. He is the Messiah. He is here to offer himself up to symbolically atone for the evil we bring into this world. That's the message to carry away today: We know who Jesus is and we can celebrate this right now! Please pray with me.

God, thank for Scripture, for the Gospels in particular. They have made it clear to us who Jesus is. We are here to celebrate the earthly life and the eternal life of Jesus Christ, Jesus the Anointed One, Jesus the Messiah. It's not a sad day. It's a day when we offer up our deepest thanks for living in a time and place where we have the privilege of knowing exactly who Jesus is. Amen.