

ARE WE EVER REALLY FORSAKEN?
Mark 8:31-33/Psalm 22:1-2; 6-7; 14-18; 23-31
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“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Known by many to be Jesus’ last words before he died, but less recognized as the first verse of Psalm 22. This lament can be either interpreted as Jesus’ last pitiful cry for help or a strong statement identifying himself with the suffering psalmist who wrote these words a thousand years before.

Listen again to these selected verses,

*But I am a worm...
scorned by others and
despised by the people.
I am poured out like water
and all my bones are out of
joint;
my mouth is dried up...
and my tongue sticks to my
jaws;
...a company of evildoers
encircles me.
My hands and feet have
shriveled;
I can count my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
they divide my clothes among
themselves,
and for my clothing they cast
lots. (Psalm 22:1; 6-7/14-18)*

This is the description of Jesus being crucified, surrounded by gloating enemies, glad to be rid of him, his swollen tongue stuck to his jaw and all his bones pulled out of joint while his executioners gamble for his clothes just a few feet below him.

Of course you could argue Psalm 22 is a template describing our universal response to pain and suffering, but certainly Jesus claimed this Psalm for himself at the last moments of his life. But again there’s more going on here than meets the eye. Psalm 22 in its entirety is an odd mixture: both a cry for deliverance from pain and suffering, but also a hymn of celebration and hope. I’m sure when the scribes and Pharisees who came to the crucifixion heard Jesus cry out “My God, why have you forsaken me?” for one split second they only heard the lament, but then, having known and memorized the scriptures, these religious leaders must have been taken aback when they remembered the rest of the psalm and suddenly realized, even while dying Jesus was preaching the

Kingdom is nearer than you think. Listen again to these selected verses, communicating a totally different message.

*From the horns of the wild oxen
you have rescued me.
I will tell of your name to my
brothers and sisters
in the midst of the congregation
I will praise you...
stand in awe of him
all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise...
The affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from
me,
but heard when I cried to him.*

So Jesus doesn't go out with a whimper but with a bang, praising God and calling on us to praise God "who does not hide his face from me when I cried to him." Even when suffering and dying Jesus challenged our preconceived notions. What preconceived notion?

Don't we believe prosperity and health are proof of God's favor while poverty and affliction are signs of God's wrath? Certainly that was the general perception in Jesus' day. If you were a leper, blind, or lame, you must have done something wrong. Certainly affliction was God's punishment for sin. If you were poor, sick or wracked by misfortune, somehow you got what was coming to you.

But Psalm 22 blasts this notion of karma to pieces.

*For he did not despise
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face
from me,
but heard when I cried.*

Yes, there are consequences for foolish decisions. If you smoke two packs of cigarettes a day, you'll probably get cancer. If you speed at 60 MPH in a 30 MPH zone, you'll probably get a ticket. If you lie or steal, sooner or later you'll get caught. But this isn't karma, God punishing you, it's the logical consequences of foolish behavior.

Even today there's the lurking suspicion that health and wealth means God likes you better than the sick and poor, that somehow disease and poverty are the byproducts of sin. Sure there's always been a segment of the population stuck in the generational cycle of poverty, sometimes because of a lack of responsibility but more often due to circumstances beyond anyone's control: famines and floods and wars and prejudice have

always resulted in poverty and disease. How can anyone with any intelligence believe it's karma, "what goes around comes around?" And yet, back then, just as today, it's believed health and prosperity are rewards for good behavior, disease and poverty for bad. But this twisted thinking only puffs up the haves and puts a guilt trip on the have nots. It's just another rationalization for separating yourself from your neighbor.

This is bad theology that helps some of the televangelists make millions selling their books and draw high salaries so they can get around in their private jets. What's wrong with this picture? Everything! Jesus never promised unconditional health and wealth. Show me one scripture, one teaching not taken out of context making that claim and I'll eat my hat.

You already know this. Jesus came to reassure the diseased and the poor that God loves them the best because having nothing else, they need God the most. Now we have to be careful here, Jesus never taught that the poor somehow have a corner on righteousness, they need to confess their sins too, yet in God's Kingdom,

*"The poor (and afflicted) shall eat
and be satisfied." (Psalm 22:26)*

But there's more. The last verses of Psalm 22 reveal the time is coming when all the people of the earth, those who already lived and died, and those yet unborn will praise God together.

*"To him, indeed, shall all who sleep
in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow down all
who go down to the dust.*

*"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."*

(Psalm 22:30-31)

"My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" I believe Jesus tried to pray the entire psalm but was too physically weak to get it all out. His life draining away Jesus died trying one more time to bring a word of hope and celebration to whomever would listen.

In today's Gospel reading we find Peter demanding Jesus not go to Jerusalem where he'd "undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes and be killed..." (Mark 8:31) Can you blame Peter for trying to stop him? Give him some credit, despite all his egotistical bluster and bravado, Peter loved Jesus. Any good friend would attempt an intervention to keep a friend from self-destruction. Peter was right to try to stop Jesus, but he was also wrong, dead wrong, because Jesus had to die if the rest of us are to live.

So, what message or lesson should you take from these readings? Let me suggest this: there's redemption in suffering. Let me be the first to say that when I say there's "redemption in suffering", I really don't know what I'm talking about. Let me put it another way, I have yet to face any suffering that matches some of your own. I've never lost a spouse, a child or even a job. I've never been abandoned or afflicted as much as some of you. I'm not saying I've led a charmed life, but compared to many, I remain untouched by tragedy. The time may come when I too am crushed and overwhelmed, but as they say, so far, so good.

Even so I'm compelled to say there's redemption in suffering, resurrection always follows crucifixion, all things work together for good. How can I say these things?

Only because Jesus suffered and died for the sins of the world and lived to tell about it. And also because I've seen many of you sustained and loved as you walked in your own valley of death, fearing no evil because you trusted God would see you through. Your lives bear witness to this truth! There's redemption in suffering.

Within minutes we'll gather around the table to remember Jesus. "This is my body broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you. Take and eat. Take and drink."

What does it all mean? Why do we do this? The only answer I can come up with is Jesus wants us to remember him, but also join him in his suffering and death, laying our sins and sorrows at the foot of the cross, so our sin and sorrows can die with him.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Not a last desperate gasp, but a bold affirmation of hope. Even in suffering we can hope and praise if only because our God is God and our God always has our back.