

An Overwhelming Response

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 | Psalm 22:23-31 | Romans 4:13-25 | Mark 8:31-38

PSALM 22:23-31

²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. ²⁶ The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live for ever! ²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. ²⁸ For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, ³¹ and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

INTRODUCTION

I'm going to start personally, a place I don't normally venture too often when preaching. I've never been a fan of talking about some Lenten disciplines, especially fasting from certain things. It's not that I don't observe Lent—but I find people are sometimes trying to show off with what they've given up. And it seems to be something of a violation against one of the more common Lenten texts, that bit in Matthew 6 about not giving, praying, or fasting to be seen by others—but by our Father in heaven. So, I've never really been one to talk about these things. This year, however, I am taking a more traditional approach and, when asked, am willing to talk about it because it is sometimes important for message and means to meet. There's an idiomatic expression for this—to put one's money where his mouth is. The origin of this expression is something of a mystery, being used in gambling and card playing contexts back at least a hundred years and possibly originating in Ireland. I saw one hypothesis that attributed it to 17th or 18th century English conmen who would sell toads to be consumed for medicinal value. The conmen would swallow a toad and regurgitate it later, out of sight. But having demonstrated consuming the toad, they would gain the trust of the consumers and sell them—with the consumers getting quite ill after the fact.¹ The phrase, then, means to do more than just talk, to follow through, to actually do something rather than just talk about it.

Through my study of the 22nd Psalm these last weeks, I have come to believe this is a concern of the Psalmist. And it is a concern that I want us all to see as we uncover the Psalmist's argument: *God's rescue of us, should move us to mercy, and the whole world to praise.* God's rescue of us, should move us to mercy, and the whole world to praise. Let's dig in a little.

1. CRIES OF DESPAIR

The Psalm divides into two parts separated by a short phrase. The first part, which we did not recite a moment ago, is something we must, however, consider. As is made very clear in its opening verses, Psalm 22 is a Psalm of lament. Listen to these familiar opening lines:

¹ See, for example, english.stackexchange.com/questions/198654/origins-and-meaning-of-put-your-money-where-your-mouth-is.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? My God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.²

The Psalmist continues later, referring to himself as *“a worm, not a human.”*³ He speaks of how people scorn and mock him.⁴ He describes, using vivid imagery, both the enemies who encircle him and the physical anguish he is in.⁵ *“My hands and feet have shrivelled; I can count all my bones.”*⁶ His cries come to a crescendo: *“But you, O LORD, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul from the sword...”*⁷ He laments in desperation. For 20 and a half verses, the Psalmist alternates between confidence that God has saved others in the past and the harsh reality of his present—the cognitive dissonance that he cannot reconcile, the anxiety and frustration of being intimate with God—remember it was *“my God, my God”* that the Psalmist cried—and yet so distant from God. *“But you do not answer.”*⁸

And then a turning point comes. The Psalmist, at his lowest point, finds himself saved. He acknowledges: *“From the horns of the wild oxen”*—a metaphor he’d already used of the enemies surrounding him, he proclaims—*“you have rescued me.”*⁹

2. CRIES OF DEVOTION

Having declared God’s rescue, the Psalmist now composes the second and final section of poetry—the part we did recited a few minutes ago—and the right response to being rescued. Two aspects of response emerge.

The first and overwhelming response is praise of God. He begins: *“I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters.”*¹⁰ Don’t miss this, the circles of those praising God, those being invited to praise God, get larger and larger throughout our verses. It begins with his brothers and sisters. It expands to the congregation and then all the people of the Jacob—that is, the whole of the Jewish people.¹¹ Then, a few verses later, it is the ends of the earth who shall remember the Lord’s rescue, *“all the families of the nations shall worship before him.”*¹² That is, now even the gentiles are included. Ethnic division is put aside, when it comes to praising God for his rescue, Jew and gentile worship side-by-side. And even that is not enough. Listen to the final three verses again:

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

² Psa 22:1-2.

³ Psa 22:6.

⁴ Psa 22:6-7.

⁵ Psa 22:12-18.

⁶ Psa 22:16-17.

⁷ Psa 22:19-20.

⁸ Psa 22:1-2.

⁹ Psa 22:21.

¹⁰ Psa 22:22.

¹¹ Psa 22:22-23.

¹² Psa 22:27.

generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.¹³

Both those who have already passed on and those who have not yet been born—not just all people everywhere, but also for all time—shall praise the Lord for his rescue. Why? *“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.”*¹⁴ This, brothers and sisters, is a picture of the gospel. It is no accident that this is the Psalm that Christ Jesus cries on the cross. *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*¹⁵ In that moment, that moment of despair to which we look on Good Friday, that Christ was both abandoned by God and, on the third day, rescued from death by God. Our hope of rescue, as Christians, our confidence that God has saved us and will continue to save us, is found in that moment—when Christ Jesus became the Psalmist. And in the gospel, we join him—as our Gospel reading suggests, denying ourselves, picking up our own crosses, and following him. Praise be to the Lord, indeed.

If you do not yet believe this, then I invite you to read the beginning of the Psalm, to identify with the Psalmist and with Christ, and to put your hope in the gospel. And if you do already believe this, then we cannot help but join the Psalmist in lifting our voices in praise of our God who rescues. *“I will tell of your name.”*¹⁶

But, praise is not the only response. It is the first and overwhelming response. But it is accompanied by action. In verse 25, the Psalmist—having been rescued and now himself being praised by the those who, earlier in the Psalm, mocked him—the Psalmist determines to make good on his vows. And what does it look like? *“My vows I will pay before those who fear him. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live for ever!”*¹⁷ It looks like following through, like moving beyond words to action, to putting one’s money where one’s mouth is.

If we are going to praise God for his rescue of us—and we should, this Psalm makes abundantly clear—then we must also live lives that indicate God’s rescue means something to us. Mercy to those in need is where the Psalmist begins. But, I would suggest, his vows (plural) encompass far more than that. Obedience. Worship in all of life. This is what the Psalmist means when he exclaims: *“and I shall live for him.”*¹⁸ As Paul puts it in Philippians: *“let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”*¹⁹ It’s actually doing something, not just giving to the offering and thinking that’s enough. It’s following through with Lenten disciplines—and drawing closer to Christ. It’s actually implementing eco church advice. It’s caring about others and pursuing holiness. It’s actually living in a particular way, not just saying the words and hoping nobody notices your life doesn’t match. It’s more than reaching into your pockets, it’s rolling up your sleeves. In short, denying yourself and picking up your cross to crawl behind Jesus was never going to be the easy thing—but it is how one lives as a

¹³ Psa 22:29-31.

¹⁴ Psa 22:24.

¹⁵ Mark 15:34. Cf. Matt 27:46.

¹⁶ Psa 22:22.

¹⁷ Psa 22:25-26.

¹⁸ Psa 22:29.

¹⁹ Phil 1:27.

follower of Christ. And so, in the power of Christ's cross, let us commit to living this way, to caring for the poor, for sacrificing oneself for the good of others, for pursuing righteousness and justice, for preaching praise of our God who rescues us, and then practicing what we preach.

CONCLUSION

And it all starts with a word. A reminder. The difference between despair and delight for those of us who believe. The word is *rescue*. So, let me conclude with this—as I do so often when studying in the Psalms, I want to return to my favourite African bishop, who has his own way with words. He reminds us from where we came as he speaks to God:

You have *rescued* me from the condition of profound blindness and the lowest slime of corruptible flesh.²⁰

How can God's rescue of us not move us to mercy and love, to obedience and lives worthy of the gospel, and the whole world to praise?

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, we thank you for rescuing us. May we proclaim your praise to the ends of the earth and then live according to those words. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

²⁰ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 30.4.12. WSA 3 15:297.