Psalm 22: To pray like Jesus prayed

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ABSTRACT

Psalm 22 is one of the so-called messianic psalms. According to this viewpoint, the psalm should be interpreted as a direct prophecy of the suffering of Jesus. However, such a reading of the psalm completely ignores the historical situation of the psalm and also reduces the Old Testament to promise with the fulfilment only taking place in the New Testament. Instead of interpreting the psalm as a prophecy and Jesus’ use thereof as the fulfilment, it should rather be understood as an actualisation of the psalm in new circumstances. Jesus’ utilization of Psalm 22 paves the way for all believers to use it in times of suffering. Because of a personal relationship with God, all believers have the right to pray like Jesus prayed.

A INTRODUCTION

Psalm 22 is well known as one of the so-called ‘Messianic’ psalms. In this view, the psalm is understood as a direct prophecy of the suffering of the Christ. A supporter of this point of view is Hengstenberg (1970:94-106). He regards the Messiah as the exclusive subject of the psalm (Hengstenberg 1970:96). Leupold (1969:195) also accepts this predictive approach to the interpretation of the psalm which means that the whole poem is understood as a prophecy concerning Christ. This approach presupposes that the psalmist was aware of the fact that he was prophesying.

However, this reading of Psalm 22 as a direct pointer to Christ ignores the historical situation of the psalm. Furthermore, it reduces the psalm and (in this type of exegesis) the Old Testament to a promise of which the fulfilment only takes place in the New Testament. The use of Psalm 22 in the New Testament and specifically the use thereof by Jesus on the cross should rather be understood as an actualisation of the psalm. In this way the psalm has an adapted meaning and is in a certain sense rewritten (Van Uchelen 1971:149). Jesus’ suffering on the cross was unique with regard to the horror and intensity thereof. However, his suffering does not mean that people do not experience suffering anymore today. His suffering gives us the example of perfect suffering so that the pain and anguish of every person in distress can be faced, expressed, and finally healed (Davis 1992:103). Psalm 22 should therefore not be seen as a prophecy. Jesus actualised the words of Psalm 22 in the midst of the horror of the cross to his own suffering and in that He has identified Himself with every person who experiences pain and suffering.

1 This article results from research that Maré did for the DLitt et Phil degree at RAU with Prof Johan Coetzee as supervisor.
As a result of Jesus’ use of the psalm, Psalm 22 lends itself to particularly effective use by Christians today. However, Mays (1985:329) is of the opinion that Jesus alone may pray this psalm:

We do not identify, either as individual or community, with the person who prays and praises as in the use of many other psalms. That role is claimed for and explicated by Jesus alone.

He thinks that believers are only spectators in Jesus’ use of the psalm.

This is the question I wish to address in this article: Can we identify with the one who prays in Psalm 22? Or is Mays correct that Psalm 22 is reserved for Jesus’ exclusive use? May we pray as Jesus prayed?

B THE STRUCTURE OF THE PSALM

Psalm 22 can be divided into four stanzas: 2-11 forms the complaint of the poet, 12-22 is his prayer/petition, 23-27 consists of praise, whereas 28-32 closes the poem with utterances of praise in which the whole community is involved. This structure therefore displays the elements of complaint, petition and praise, which is characteristic of the psalms of lament.

C THEMES IN PSALM 22

The theme of God’s hiddenness occurs in stichs 2, 3, 12, 20 and 25. The poet begins his lament with an urgent question that reflects the despair in his heart. The purpose of the question is to gain the attention of his listener/reader who will know by the end of the psalm how this question turned out (Bratcher & Reyburn 1991:213). This theme is well known in the psalms (cf Pss 13:2; 27:9; 30:8; 42:10; 43:2; 44:25; 88:15; 89:47; 104:29).

The repetition of σια is a sign of the depth of the poet’s despair from which he calls to God. It is important to note that God is still ‘my God’. It speaks of the personal relationship that the poet has with God. This term ‘designate the divinity to whom the individual suppliant and his family or clan group are intimately or even exclusively attached’ (Gerstenberger 1988:109). Therefore, it speaks of a very intimate relationship that the poet has with God.

However, a sharp contrast exists between the fact that the poet has a personal relationship with God and the fact that God has hidden his face. Miller (1994:59) rightly calls it ‘an almost unbearable sense of contradiction’. It is exactly this fact that the poet knows the presence of God in his life, which makes the hiddenness of God such a horror. The fact of God’s hiddenness causes the psalmist to long for the times when he experienced God’s presence in his life. Yahweh has forsaken his child, He does not answer. God seems aloof, salvation is far-off, the crying of the psalmist absolutely futile. However, because of his relationship with God, he still clings to the conviction that he has the right to expect help and deliverance from
Yahweh.

The latter is emphasised in stich 12. The trouble the poet experiences is at hand, therefore he has no choice but to turn to the One he lives in relationship with and to ask Him not to be far away. In stichs 13-19 the poet describes the actions of his enemies and the effect thereof in his own life, before he again prays in stich 20 that Yahweh should not be far from him, but that He should deliver him. His prayer for salvation is the direct result of his personal relationship with Yahweh. Even though Yahweh has hidden Himself, the poet has no other option but to pray that the hidden God, his God, should reveal Himself. He is allowed to pray like this because of his intimate relationship with God.

The hiddenness of God does not indicate a physical distance between God and the poet but it is a very real sense of Yahweh’s absence that has its effect in tangible ways on the poet’s life (Balentine 1983:156). It should be kept in mind that God’s hiddenness is in fact an aspect of his revelation. He is a sovereign God who hides and reveals himself as he wants. Murphy (1980:232) is therefore correct when he writes that Yahweh is never more present than when He is absent (cf also Tostengard 1992:168 who speaks of God’s ‘hidden presence’ as well as Terrien 1978:321 who refers to the ‘presence of an absence’). God’s hiddenness results in a number of negative consequences for the poet, specifically the threat of the enemies and the rejection of his community. God’s hiddenness has religious as well as social implications for the poet (Balentine 1983:62).

The phrase [\(\text{WNM}, \text{mi wyn}: \text{P}, \text{ryTis}\text{\\|hiAalw} \text{\|}]\text{ Also occurs in 25b. Here it should be understood in the context of the trust that the poet expresses that God has heard his prayer and that He will deliver him from his troubles. The psalmist here states explicitly that God is not hiding Himself, but that He has listened when He was called upon.]

The theme of the threat of the enemies occurs in stichs 7-9, 13-19 and 21-22. The effect of the threat of the enemies on the petitioner is phenomenal. He describes it as follows in stich 7: [\(\text{vyaiAalw} \text{\|]}\text{. The image the poet uses to describe himself, namely a worm, implies ‘both a state of decay and unpleasantness ... and by implication the nearness of death itself’ (Craigie 1983:199; cf Ex 16:20; Is 14:11).}\]. The words of stich 9 (cf Ps 3:3) should be understood ironically. It almost seems like a prayer, but in reality it is a provocation by his enemies. Stolz (1980:139) aptly summarises this provocation by the enemies:

Gerade das Vertrauen auf Gott wird lächerlich gemacht! Wer sich auf die kultischen Ordnungen verlässt und den Schritt zum Gotteslob tun will, wird als Narr dargestellt.
The trust that the poet and his forefathers had in God for salvation is made into a parody in this provocation (Davis 1992:97). They are convinced that the poet’s situation is hopeless and that there is nothing or no one who can or wants to help him.

The suffering of the poet is not of a physical nature, but spiritual in nature. The threat of the enemies in this case is thus still aimed at the psyche of the poet. It can indeed be described as a crisis of faith (Weiser 1962:222). The derision of his enemies affects his relationship with God and ironically confirms his feeling that Yahweh has broken off his relationship with him and that, consequently, his hope for God is in fact hopeless.

The threat of the enemies is described further by means of a number of metaphors in stichs 13-19, as well as 21-22. The poet is surrounded by his enemies. They are described as ‘bulls’ and ‘the strong bulls of Bashan’ (13, 22). Bashan was well known for the fact that it produced the biggest bulls (Bratcher & Reyburn 1991:219; Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:149). The identity of the enemies is not revealed in the text. Kraus (1993:297) thinks of the ‘demons of sickness’. Prinsloo (1995:72) is of the opinion that it refers to ‘influential people who threaten to overwhelm the psalmist in his misery’. The latter is probably closest to the truth. The context of the psalm comes to its full potential more when one thinks of human enemies.

The enemies are further described as lions that devour their prey (14, 22; cf Pss 7:3; 10:9; 17:12; 57:5; 104:21). These metaphors depict the violence and the horror of the attack of the adversaries vividly.

In stichs 15 and 16 the effect of the threat of the enemies on the poet is described by means of three comparisons. In 15a the psalmist says that he is poured out like water (cf Jos 7:5; 2 Sm 14:14; Ezek 7:17) and that his bones are being pulled out of joint, as one would find in a corpse. In 15b he says that his heart has become like wax that melted away in his intestines (cf Dt 20:8; 2 Sm 17:10; Pss 68:3; 97:5). His quality of life and his vitality disappear and he is on the brink of death. His strength has dried up like a potsherd and his tongue sticks to his palate (16; cf Ps 69:4). Again, the language should be understood metaphorically. All these phenomena can be ascribed to the physical reaction of the poet at the moment of distress. Therefore we do not need to explain it as a physical illness as Sabourin (1974:226) and Stuhlmueller (1983:146) understand it. Miller (1986:106) also points out that the use of language by the poet in this case can refer to many other experiences besides sickness. Inner conflict, of whatever nature, can certainly manifest psychosomatically in the way that the poet describes here.

The psalmist feels helpless to such an extent in the face of the threat of the enemies that he feels that he is sinking down into the dust of death (cf Job 7:21; Pss 7:6; 90:3). The worst is that Yahweh is held accountable for this condition: because He has forsaken him, his adversaries triumph over him and he experiences the worst misery imaginable. From this it seems that the petitioner is of the opinion that Yahweh has the totality of life, positive as well as negative, under his control. This
Gives him the boldness to struggle with Yahweh and to take hold of his salvation.

In stichs 17 and 21 the enemies are described as dogs that surround the psalmist. Dogs were not esteemed at all in Old Testament times (cf 1 Sm 17:43; 24:15; 2 Sm 3:8), and were only kept as pets since New Testament times (Stander & Louw 1990:200). They roamed the streets at night (cf Ps 59:7), and were regarded as scavengers (cf 1 Ki 14:11; 16:4; 21:23; 2 Ki 9:36).

The enemies are further described as a gang of robbers that have surrounded the poet and tied him up (17). While he was helpless under their attack, they defamed him (18) and divided his clothes among themselves (19). They gambled for his clothes even before he died. By this they told him that as far as they were concerned he was already dead. Thus they exhausted him until he was only skin and bones (18).

In the face of this overwhelming attack on his life, the poet cannot but pray: brj meh lyxh (21). Sword is here used as a metaphor for the powers that threaten the poet’s life (Prinsloo 1995:73; cf also Pss 37:14; 57:5; 63:11; 144:10). He prays for salvation and deliverance from these threats that are so intense that the psalmist faces death.

The theme of God’s deeds of salvation in the past occurs in stichs 5 and 6. This theme is closely linked with another theme that will be discussed later, namely trust in God. God’s deeds of salvation in the past stand in sharp contrast to the present situation of the poet. He is in trouble; he experiences God as absent, yet Yahweh has shown Himself in the past to be a God of salvation (cf Jos 24:11-12; Pss 44:2-4; 77:12; 107; 111:3-9; 143:5). Because Yahweh has saved the nation from trouble in the past, He is the Saving God to every Israelite. Therefore they expected that in the future He would again do deeds of salvation, not only for the nation, but also for the individual (Westermann 1981:42). Yahweh is usually the subject of an active verb in Israel’s testimony about Him (Brueggemann 1997:123) and part of his activities was to save. The God that saves means that He is a God ‘who can disrupt any circumstance of social bondage and exploitation, overthrow ruthless orderings of public life, and authorize new circumstances of dancing freedom, dignity and justice’ (Brueggemann 1997:208). The deeds of salvation in the past then becomes the basis for the trust of the poet in the present, that God will save him from his trouble, that the mockery and the derision will come to an end and he will take his place in society again.

The theme of God’s salvation occurs in stichs 12, 20-22, 25 and 32. The poet pertinently states that it is Yahweh alone who can save (12). In his trouble there is no one else to whom he can turn. The hidden God is, ironically, the only one who can help. The urgency of his prayer for help is very clear in stich 20, where he prays that Yahweh must help quickly. His misery is great, it has been going on for a long time and further delay from God’s side to help will prove fatal to the poet. He pleads for help because the enemies threaten to overwhelm him totally (21-22).

In stichs 25 and 32 the theme of salvation does not function as part of the poet’s pleading prayer, but as part of his expression of trust that Yahweh will save. Here he
has come to a point where his circumstances have not yet changed, but he has received the assurance in his heart that Yahweh has heard him and that salvation is imminent.

Another theme in Psalm 22 is the dominion of God in stichs 4 and 29-32 (cf Pss 80:1; 93:1-5; 99:1; 103:22; Is 6:3; 57:15). From this it is very clear that God’s holiness and the praise that is brought to Him are in close relation with his rule. He alone is the Holy One of Israel and therefore He alone is the One who rules.

Usually God’s rule as the Holy One and the praise that He receives are in direct relation to salvation (Coetzee 1986:91). It is in this regard that the function of this theme in Psalm 22 should be understood. God’s dominion is proved through his deeds of salvation for which He receives praise from the nation. He has proven Himself as Ruler in the past through his deeds of salvation (5-6), and He must continue this pattern in the present and future. His holiness and dominion are also related to his reliability. Because He is holy, and because He rules, and because He saves, the poet can trust in him to also bring salvation in his situation.

The effect of God’s salvation as theme occurs in stichs 28, 30-32. In stichs 28 and 30 it is about the consequences of his salvation for the nations, and in stichs 31-32 the consequences of his salvation for the next generation are raised. The effects of Yahweh’s deeds of salvation are closely linked with his rule. The practical realisation of his dominion in his deeds of salvation has certain consequences in the lives of all people. In stich 28 it is stated that all nations will return to Yahweh and will worship Him. When the nations observe the rule of God through his deeds of salvation they will acknowledge the fact that Yahweh alone is King.

In stich 30 two groups of people are mentioned specifically: the rich and the poor. This merismus (cf Keel-Leu 1970:410-411; Kselman 1982:190) emphasises that everybody, rich and poor and everyone in between, will worship Yahweh. Eventually it is emphasised that Yahweh is King and that He is in control of everything and everyone. It means that everybody must worship Him; the psalmist who feels forsaken by God (2) as well as the enemies who thought that God has lost control of the situation (8-9; cf Craigie 1983:201).

Stichs 31 and 32 describe the effect of God’s salvation on the next generation. One generation will tell the next generation about it. They will in turn proclaim the righteousness of God, in other words his deeds of salvation, to the people who are still to be born. This will ensure that this tradition of the Heilsgeschichte will be the way whereby faith in God will be propagated throughout the world and throughout the ages (Weiser 1962:226).

The theme of trust in Yahweh or security in God occurs in stichs 5-6, 10-11, 22 and 32. In stichs 5 and 6 it is about the trust that the forefathers had in Yahweh. Here the theme is closely linked with the theme of Yahweh’s deeds of salvation that has already been discussed above. The forefathers’ trust in Yahweh brought them safety and salvation. They were not ashamed because Yahweh did not despise their cries for help in their trouble, but He helped them. It is important to note that this trust is
expressed in the midst of a crisis. It is a trust that was born out of the melting pot of man’s struggle with the negative aspects of life. The strength of their trust is emphasised by the multiple repetition of the word 'jфъ. The forefathers’ trust in Yahweh and his deeds of salvation for their sake eventually becomes the foundation for the birth of faith in the poet’s own heart. God’s deeds of salvation for the sake of his people are directly related to his covenant with them. Because He has made a covenant with the people, He is always prepared to help them in times of crises.

The term ‘covenant’ in the Old Testament does not indicate a state, but it is something that has been established as a result of God’s dealings with his people. Israel’s testimony of God is primarily a description of what happens between God and Israel and not an indication of a condition. Seen in this light, ‘jфъ should be understood as an action, something that happens between Yahweh and Israel, something active and not static (cf Westermann 1981:47-49).

However, it is not only God’s dealings with the forefathers that confirm the poet’s trust in Him, but also his own experiences of God’s trustworthiness. In stichs 10 and 11 he looks back at his life and comes to the realisation that Yahweh has kept him safe since birth. This security that he feels with God is strikingly described by the psalmist using the image of a little baby that is safely and peacefully suckling at his mother’s breast (cf Ps 71:6; Is 44:2, 24; 49:1, 5; Jr 1:5; Gl 1:15). He acknowledges the fact that God has given him life, that he is dependent upon him and that since his childhood there has been a personal relationship between him and God. The inconceivability of his current situation is emphasised by the contrast between the present and God’s involvement in the past: ‘... that past experience seemed like a hollow mockery of reality’ (Craigie 1983:199). Yet the realisation of God’s care in the past helps him to place his trust in Yahweh in his present affliction.

The theme of trust is further indicated in stichs 22 and 32 by the use of two prophetic perfecta: מ‘ן פק (22) and ח¢ (32). Here the trust of the poet is particularly strong. The emergency situation is still there, but the poet is so certain of God’s intervention and deliverance that he experiences it, as if it had already happened. It is also striking that the two prophetic perfecta close the lament section as well as the praise section. This emphasises that the psalmist trusts God in the midst of his lament and in the midst of his praise. Trust in God, in the midst of any experience in life, is thus emphasised.

A theme that is closely related to trust is that of praise. It occurs in stichs 4 and 23-32. In stich 4 the holiness of Yahweh is brought into relation with his trustworthiness. He is holy therefore He is trustworthy. The relation between God’s holiness and his deeds of salvation has already been pointed out. He proves his dominion through his deeds of salvation on behalf of his people. Therefore He ought to be praised. Thus praise is directly linked with Yahweh’s acts of salvation.

Yahweh abides in the praises of his people (4). This figure refers to the belief that in the tabernacle and the temple Yahweh was enthroned above the mercy seat, which was His throne. The praises of his people are now his new throne above
which He resides. This means that He is surrounded by the praises of Israel. He is the reason, as well as the subject and the essence of the praises of Israel, because those who trust in him have experienced his liberating power (Kraus 1993:295).

In the last two stanzas of the psalm (stichs 23-32) this theme takes a central position. Again the praises to God cannot be separated from the trust that the psalmist has that Yahweh will bring deliverance. Yahweh is again praised for his concrete acts of salvation. This comes to the fore, especially in stich 25 where it is explicitly stated that Yahweh does not despise the call of distress of the needy. This in stich 32 is also a reference to God’s deeds of salvation. This verb ‘shows what is meant by Old Testament theology, how the Old Testament speaks of God. The centre of all the Old Testament’s theological discourse is found in a verbal clause: God has acted’ (Westermann 1989:91). The man who has first-hand experience of how God works and acts, first by being hidden and then by bringing salvation, cannot do anything else than to praise Him.

That is the purpose of praise - to respond to the experience of God’s grace and power, to exalt the one who is seen and known to be gracious and powerful, and to bear witness to all who hear that God is God (Miller 1985:9).

Mention is made of a number of categories of people who must praise Yahweh. In stich 23 it is the petitioner himself that praises God along with his fellow believers. The poet will bring praise to Yahweh in public for what He has done for him. Most probably this song of praise was accompanied by a thanksgiving sacrifice to God (cf Lv 3:1 et seq; 7:11 et seq; Fohrer 1993:158). In stich 24 the poet appeals to the congregation to bring praise to Yahweh. The individual’s praise of God gives rise to corporate praise. Thus the praise of the individual has implications for the fellowship of believers (cf Prinsloo 1995:74). What God does for the individual is reflected in God’s actions with the community. Both the individual and the congregation stand on the receiving end of God’s grace and the experience of one is always a reminder and an appeal to the others to trust the God who lifts the needy out of his misery (Miller 1986:143).

The community is identified by three different terms: ‘those who fear Yahweh’, ‘the entire offspring of Jacob’ and ‘offspring of Israel’. This threefold repetition includes everyone who lives in a close relationship with God. The threefold command ‘praise Him’, ‘honour Him’ and ‘revere Him’ emphasises the comprehensiveness of the service they must offer to Yahweh. These three plural imperatives together with the cohortatives of stich 23 put emphasis on the praise being offered to Yahweh.

In stichs 26 and 27 the petitioner praises God again with the community for what He has done. The psalmist will fulfil his vows (cf Pss 66:13; 76:12; 116:14, 18) in the presence of those who fear God. The deliverance of an individual has a definite effect on the community. It is not only the individual whose faith is strengthened,
but also the whole congregation. This strengthening of faith results in praise in which all who seek Yahweh is involved. Prinsloo (1995:75) calls this joint praise of the individual and the congregation ‘a single symphony because Yahweh is about to help the psalmist and his salvation will have positive effects on all of society’.

In stichs 28 and 29 all the nations of the earth are brought under the rule of God and therefore they too must worship Him. Yahweh’s work of salvation on behalf of man eventually attains universal meaning. Yahweh’s acts of deliverance draw the attention of all the nations, and in return they turn to Him and acknowledge and accept his kingship.

In stich 30 the rich, the famous and the mortal are called to praise while stichs 31 and 32 state clearly that also the next generations in the far future will serve and praise Yahweh.

From this it is clear that all people are included in the praise that should be brought to God. The individual, the congregation, all who fear Yahweh and seek Him, rich and poor, all the nations of the earth, even the future generations cannot do anything than offer praise to God, especially when the greatness of his acts of salvation for the sake of those who call on Him in their times of trouble are considered.

**D SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Psalm 22 can be used by all people of faith as an expression of their worship. The psalm contains the two poles of man’s experience before God: lament and praise. Every person experiences seasons of joy, as well as seasons of heartache and misery, where God is experienced as absent.

Our understanding and use of Psalm 22 cannot totally be separated from the New Testament use thereof. I have already mentioned in the introduction that I do not accept the direct messianic approach to this psalm but that I believe Jesus’ use of the psalm should be understood as an actualisation of the words of Psalm 22 to Christ’s own suffering on the cross. Thus He has identified Himself with every person who experiences pain and suffering.

Jesus did not only identify Himself with the suffering of all people, but He took it upon Himself and carried it in his body. In doing so, God, in Christ, knows what it means to suffer as a human being and to be forsaken by God. God, in Christ, entered into and participated in the horror of mortality. Therefore He can have compassion with everyone who suffers and He can comfort those of us who walk now in the footsteps of the psalmist.

Certainly there is a cardinal difference between the suffering of Christ and the poet’s suffering. At the end of the psalm, the poet could offer praise in the midst of the congregation for the salvation that God brings, because he escaped death. Jesus died and thus experienced the worst suffering there could ever be. The psalmist didn’t taste death at this point; he did taste mockery and insult and scorn, and
physically and psychologically he was exhausted, but his praise flows from his experience that salvation is imminent and that he would not experience the total separation from God that death would bring. However, Jesus could not fulfil God’s purpose in any other way than to empty the cup He had to drink to the very last drop. The resurrection life was only possible for Him on the other side of death (Davidson 1998:82-83). Miller (1986:63) supports this when he points out that Jesus’ use of the psalm is an open invitation to see Christ as someone who cries out in the laments. Due to Jesus’ use of Psalm 22 the early Christian Church spotted similarities between the fate of the poet and Jesus’ death on the cross. The New Testament writers’ narrative of Jesus’ use of the psalm confirms that God was present in the suffering of Christ and that his suffering established new possibilities for life and death. To them Psalm 22 was the source to articulate the meaning of the cross and the resurrection (McCann 1993:173).

The question now is: May we use Psalm 22 today in our own times of suffering as an expression of our own feelings of abandonment by God, or is Mays correct that Jesus alone may pray this psalm? Are we indeed only spectators to Jesus’ use of the psalm?

In my opinion Mays is incorrect and we may indeed pray as Jesus prayed. Reumann (1974:48) pointed out that Psalm 22 has probably already been used by devote Jews in the face of sickness, pain, sadness and death. Van Tilborg (1988:906-907) mentions that the interpretation of the text in the Septuagint and the Targum is used ‘to find words for the suffering of someone else ... as a verbalization of real suffering’. If the Jews of that time prayed this psalm and Jesus set the example for us by verbalising his own suffering in the words of Psalm 22, then there is certainly no reason why believers today cannot pray this psalm. In Jesus’ use of the psalm there is indeed no indication that it was reserved for his exclusive use. The fact that He prayed this psalm rather shows that believers can come before God in times of pain and suffering following in the footsteps of Jesus, praying the same prayer He prayed. Jesus’ use of the psalm on Calvary indicates there is a definite link between the God-forsakenness of the psalmist and the events of the cross (Tostengard 1992:170). Surely as believers we can also identify with the events of the cross in our own times of God-forsakenness. Then we can for sure pray as Jesus prayed. In his own use of the psalm, Jesus paved the way for all believers to lament to God in times of intense suffering.

The poet of Psalm 22 wants to tell everybody who suffers that they may cry out, they are allowed to lament, they may ask questions of God, they are allowed to express their feelings of despair and God-forsakenness, they may pray as Jesus prayed. Pleins (1993:15-16) made a striking remark in this regard:

Worship that does not give expression to this kind of pain or despair is worship that fears to touch the harsh realities of human existence and poverty. ... Words of anger at God are terribly uncomfortable, but the psalmists recognized that worship would remain a shallow affair if the
worshipper’s rage is left outside the sanctuary. This willingness to give expression to the agony of the sufferer is, in biblical terms, an act of worship. To speak from one’s pain and oppression – to no longer hide one’s rage over injustice – is the essential first step in approaching the God who, in our suffering, seems so aloof.

Psalm 22 confirms that the right to address God in this manner is born from a personal relationship with my God, the God who has shown Himself to be faithful in the past, the God whom the poet has come to know as a God who, although He is seemingly absent at times, often reveals Himself from within his hiddenness. In times of crises, when God seems far away and even completely uninterested in the fate of the believer, the petitioner should still run to Him and cling to Him for He will answer.

The message of Psalm 22 is ultimately that believers may lament wholeheartedly to the God who understands. Jesus lamented to God in his time of extreme, horrible suffering. We may follow his example and pray as He did. When God answers, the believer can then also burst out into praise to the glory of his Name ‘because He has done it’.

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