

FIRST WORD

“My God, my God,
why have you forsaken me?”
(Mt 27:46)



St. Matthew reports these words of Jesus from the cross asking God why he has been forsaken. They were understandably most uncomfortable for the Christian community to recall. St. Luke substitutes another prayer, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46). In Luke, Jesus addresses God in the way we have become accustomed, "Father." In Matthew, Jesus says "My God," like any other human being. Matthew wants us to know that Jesus experienced death and abandonment on exactly the same terms as all of us, no secret trap doors, no escape hatches, and no exceptions. Some early Christian heretics even questioned whether Jesus actually died on Calvary or more appropriately only feigned his death. How could the Son of God die? But it is only through death and abandonment that Jesus could be our savior: he took all of us to the cross with him so that together we could in our common weakness and helplessness experience the power of God. As the Apostles' Creed laconically states, "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried."

When Jesus utters his lament, he expresses all the accumulated sorrows of the world, all the unrequited crimes ever committed, and all the deaths unpunished. Without turning away he faces the realities of sin, injustice, pain, and terror, and of evil itself. But Matthew wants us to remember that Jesus' lament was a cry not of despair but of prayer, the very first words of Psalm 22. His words are addressed to God who, though God appears silent, alone has the power to save when all

human resources and solutions have proved inadequate and have given out.

The Book of Psalms is the prayer book of the Bible. The psalms were Jesus' own prayers throughout his life as a Jew. The psalms have been rightly called "a school of prayer" for they teach us how to pray.

The first thing the psalms have to teach us is that we do not have to wait to be in a pious mood or even especially religious in order to pray. We pray out of our actual situation at the time, good or bad, and this determines whether our prayer will take the form of praise or lament. We lay out our life before God as we see it at the time, and if our prayer is successful, we move from a subjective view of how things are to a more objective perspective, that of God. In the prayer of lament we may begin by expressing our feeling that no one can know what we are going through, that we are completely alone and cut off. Nothing and no one can help. But by the fact that we engage in the process of actually putting into words our situation and address them to God, even when God seems distant and uncaring, we place ourselves on the path to new understanding and living.

Psalm 22 that Jesus utters is a psalm of personal lamentation and desolation. It begins by describing with clinical honesty the present situation of the one who is praying as he sees it.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
The words of my groaning do nothing to save me.
My God, I call to you by day and you do not
answer,
at night but I feel no respite. (Ps 22:1-2)

The prayer then describes the self-loathing of one who feels unlucky and cursed.

But I am a worm, not a man,
scorn of mankind, contempt of the people,
all who see me jeer at me,
they sneer and wag their heads,
“He trusted himself to God, let God¹ set him free!
Let him deliver him, as he took such delight in
him.” (Ps 22:6–8)

The psalmist then gives in to his worst fears and most paranoid imaginings.

Many bulls are encircling me,
wild bulls of Bashan closing in on me.
Lions ravening and roaring
open their jaws at me. (Ps 22:11–12)

In complete meltdown, as if in a kind of psychotic episode, he feels he is going to die.

My strength is trickling away,
my bones are all disjointed,
my heart has turned into wax,
melting inside me.
My mouth is dry as earthenware,
my tongue sticks to my jaw.
You lay me down in the dust of death.
(Ps 22:14–15)

He lets his imagination run wild and imagines the worst.

A pack of dogs surrounds me,
a gang of villains is closing in on me
as if to hack off my hands and my feet.
I can count every one of my bones
while they look on and gloat;
they divided my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing. (Ps 22:16–18)

Because of his brutal honesty about how desperate he is and how no human agency can help him, the psalmist now is in the right position to solicit divine help. He has arrived at the point of turning away from himself toward God.

God, do not hold aloof!
My strength, come quickly to my help,
rescue my soul from the sword,
the one life I have from the grasp of the dog!
Save me from the lion's mouth,
my poor life from the wild bulls' horns!
(Ps 22:19–21)

He has broken through his self-preoccupation. He can now focus upon God and be open to God's assistance. His isolation is also dissipating, and he invites his friends to join him in praising God. It was through this process of prayer that his lament has turned into praise.

I shall proclaim your name to my brothers,
praise you in full assembly:
You who fear Yahweh, praise him!

All the race of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all the race of Israel!
For he has not despised
nor disparaged the poverty of the poor,
he has not turned away his face,
but has listened to the cry for help. (Ps 22:24–26)

The letter to the Hebrews was a late addition to the Bible. Once ascribed to St. Paul and now, correctly, ascribed to an unknown author, perhaps a Jewish priest, the letter was considered by some to be too extreme in its description of Christ's humanity. St. Augustine, for one, loved it, and in its central section it provides a beautiful and fitting context in which to understand properly what Jesus was saying when he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The letter to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus as a priest, a title never given him in his lifetime. The Jewish priests who carried out the worship of the Temple had to be members of a particular tribe. Jesus therefore could never be a priest in this sense. Jesus, according to Hebrews, is a priest "of the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 6:20).

The figure of Melchizedek appears in the Book of Genesis. He is the pagan priest to whom Abraham offers tithes and from whom he begs a blessing (Gn 14:17–18). Just as mysteriously as he appears in the biblical narrative, Melchizedek disappears, never to appear again. Following a rabbinical form of interpreting the scriptures that what is not described does not exist, Hebrews ascribes to Melchizedek a priesthood without beginning

or end, an eternal priesthood (Heb 7:3). Jesus' priesthood, like that of Melchizedek, is eternal, it lasts forever.

But according to Hebrews, Jesus' priesthood has other characteristics that uniquely suit him for this role.

Since in Jesus, the Son of God, we have the supreme high priest who has gone through the highest heaven, we must hold onto our profession of faith. For the high priest we have is not incapable of feeling our human weakness with us, but has been put to the test in exactly the same way as ourselves, apart from sin. Let us, then, have no fear in approaching the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace when we are in need of help. (Heb 4:14–16)

In direct terms that some thought denied his divinity, the letter to the Hebrews describes how Jesus our high priest offered himself for our salvation.

During his life on earth, he offered up prayer and entreaty, with loud cries and with tears, to the one who had the power to save him from death, and, winning a hearing by his reverence, he learned obedience, Son though he was, through his sufferings; when he had been perfected, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation, and was acclaimed by God with the title of high priest of the order of Melchizedek. (Heb 5:7–10)

It unsettles us to be told that Jesus our glorious high priest was reduced so low as to have to entreat God "with loud cries and tears" and that in order to win a hearing he

had to demonstrate obedience. Furthermore, we are told he had to “learn” how to be obedient by his sufferings in order to achieve perfection. And yet this is what St. Matthew likewise teaches us in recording Jesus’ cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

**Dialogue Points for a Conversation
with the Eucharistic Lord**

1. Try to pay perfect attention now to the fact that the Lord Jesus is actually in this space with you. Let him speak to you and listen to what he says.
2. With total candor, let the Lord walk with you through the moments of your life when you felt the most abandoned and confused, past and present. Allow him to relieve you of these sorrows.