



RESEARCH ARTICLE

LOCATING GOD IN TIMES OF LONELINESS AN EXEGETICAL PAPER ON PSALMS 22

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness is killing. Several people in all generations have one existential issue or the other for which they feel forsaken, alone, perplexed, and broken-hearted. It was so devastating that the Psalmist, Psalm number 22 verses 1 alarmed: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me...? Even the Lord Jesus felt the devastating effect of loneliness that he cried similarly in the Gospels, when he was facing the ordeals of the cross. The Psalmist in his own consternation found solution in raising a dwelling place for God. Against this background, the paper hypothesizes that the praise of God in times of trouble is the legitimate solution to the crisis of hopelessness, bewilderment, and loneliness. Closely related to that are the spiritual instrument of war employed by the Psalmist namely: the weapon of prayer, hope, and trust to overcome the problem of rejection, loneliness, and dehumanizing experiences. In such situation, the distance between where God is not and where there is God is the real source of dilemma. The paper therefore attempts to answer the question of where is God in time of perplexity.

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INTRODUCTION

Three Psalms are renowned to be referred to as Messianic. They are: Psalms 22, 23, and 24. The first of the three, 22, focuses on the coming Saviour; while the second, 23, pictures the Saviour as shepherd of the people of God; and lastly, Psalm 24 proclaims the sovereignty of the Saviour. Hence these psalms should be regarded as tripartite or triangular exposition on the Saviour, long before his birth. Psalm 22 is quoted seven times in the New Testament as a reference to Jesus in Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34 etc. The same Psalm can also be studied alongside with Psalm 69, and Isaiah 53. So, Psalm 22 is our preoccupation in this work. The twenty second Psalm is a poem of inestimable value in that it is emotionally laden from poll to poll.¹ It expresses a deep sense of despondency, yet it culminates in the height of joy, expressing the goodness of God. Several scholars have made responses to it based on their perception of the composition of the Psalm, while others have divided the Psalm into several segments like three, two or more. Against this backdrop, John Baigent titled the Psalm "from perplexity to Praise.

²The first part covers verses 1-21 with the description: "the dark night of the soul" whereas the other part covers verses 22-31 with the sub title: "daylight" ahead. Derek Kidner titled the Psalm as the "Psalm of the Cross" with the two sub titles of "the power of darkness" (1-21), and "the spread of Joy" covering verses 22-31.³ However, Roger E. Dickson titled the same Psalm as "cry from anguish and joy in Praise." He divided the Psalm into three parts namely: "my God, my God," (1-6), "you ... took me," (9-21) and "I will declare" (22-31).⁴ William R. Taylor; and W. Stewart McCullough titled the entire chapter to be a "prayer of a lonely soul," with two sub-headings namely: "the cry of a troubled individual (1-21), and "thanksgiving to God."⁵ Cyril Okorochoa also divided the Psalm into two sections namely: suffering, and "beyond suffering."⁶ However, this writer is of the opinion that the

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¹ This is a Psalm that expresses the deepest emotion of being forsaken to the point of death; at the same time the Psalm gives a hilarious assurance, hope, and praise of God's people in the habitation of the Almighty.

² John W. Baigent, "The Psalms" *The International Bible Commentary with the New International Version* ed. F.F. Bruce, H.L. Ellison, and G.C.D. Howley. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 571-572.

³ Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries on Psalms 1-72*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1973), 105-109.

⁴ Roger E. Dickson, *Dickson Teacher's Bible: International King James Version with Commentary and Encyclopedic Study Guide*. (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Africa International Missions, 2011), 625.

⁵ William R. Taylor; and W. Stewart McCullough, "The Book of Psalms," *The Interpreter's Bible*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 115-121.

⁶ Cyril Okorochoa, "Psalms" *African Bible Commentary* ed Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi, Kenya: Word Alive Publishers, 2006), 630-631.

Psalm 22 is better divided into two with subdivisions under each of them for detail analysis of the content. These divisions shall be in the following considerations. The first division is tagged: “the lonesome dark night of the Soul,” covering verses 1-21, and “Joy at the day break,” covering verses 22-31. These divisions are however re-subdivided by this writer into two. Under “the lonesome dark night of the Soul” come four divisions namely: “the power of darkness upon the soul in times of loneliness” (verses 1-8); security under His Canopy in times of loneliness (verses 9-11); “rapacious and roaring voice of loneliness” (verses 12-18); divine intervention in times of lonesomeness” (verses 19-21). The second division “joy at the day break” is further subdivided into two namely: “the votive feast,” (verses 22-26), and “the boundless kingdom.” (verses 27-31). The opening verse of the Psalm is a reflection of an individual lament which is followed by a confident vow of praise and worship in verses 22-31.⁷ John Durham remarked the fact that there is no other Psalm that vividly portrayed the distance between where God is not and where God is than this Psalm. It reflects the most awful isolation, ever conceivable in terms of physical, mental and emotional agony; a nightmarish existential shifts from reality to emphatic realistic vision. However, he was amazingly lifted to the effect that he did not only come out of his gloom, he lifted his readers with him to the loftiest fellowship of praise and worship imaginable. According to Baigent the relationship between the two divisions of the Psalm is not clearly discernible, yet the voice of praise and thanksgiving for deliverance is accompanied by votive sacrifice and worship in verse 25. Let us give consideration to the first part of the Psalm.

The lonesome dark night of the soul

Psalm 22 verses 1-21 is reminiscence of author’s experience of suffering, despondency, and loneliness. It appears that while the Psalmist was grappling with his anguish and pleading for God’s deliverance, he received assurance that heard his prayer and so a dramatic change of his mood is noticeable. He looks forward to praising God in public and fulfilling of his vows. The passage sounds very much like the experience of an individual, still, the stereotyped language and imagery in the passage makes it a little difficult to determine the exact nature of the suffering he was passing through, be it physical, mental, or temperamental. One thing that may be considered clear in his physical or emotional problems is worsened by the feeling of divine abandonment and God’s refusal to answer prayer, or give heed to his cries;⁸ especially when other people around him questioned him, his God and his trust in God. That will, humanly speaking justify his desperate cry: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”⁹ There are two issues that make this psalm to be unequal. The Psalmist does not protest his innocence though it is implied in verse one; neither does he call for vengeance on his enemies as in Psalm 17:69. A wholistic effect of his vindication (verse 27) appears would be more

suitable if the Psalmist were to be a king than for him to be an ordinary Israelite. Even then it is not unlikely that other individuals may make use of this psalm to relate it to their own troubles, and it could even have been used to express the feelings of the nation during a time of distress.¹⁰ The idea that the Psalm accompanied a symbolic humiliation and restoration of the king at an annual festival is highly speculative; however a cue could be taken from the quotation of Jesus when he was on the cross in Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34, as well as his post resurrection teaching in Luke 24:26, 44. Most of the New Testament writers see this Psalm as a clear prefiguring of the passion of Christ and His subsequent vindication. The mockery of Jesus was echoed by the priests in Matthew 27:39, a parallel to the division of his clothing among them was fulfilled by the soldiers in John 19:23. This passage, unlike Isaiah 52:13-53, the Suffering Servant was portrayed with all the rationale, and significance behind the suffering, but this is not stated in Psalm 22. It is fitting for believers of this contemporary time to accept that the description of a genuine experience of the psalmist was providentially controlled by the Spirit of God to provide a foreshadowing of the experience of Christ. This will not be a surprise that this Psalm has been included in the Christian Book of Common Prayer for use on God Friday.¹¹ Let us examine the first part of the first main subheadings.

(a) The Power of Darkness upon the soul in times of Loneliness. (verses 1-8)

This part of the Psalm is asterisked by an excruciating alternation of the I, me, sections at an increasing length in verses 1-2, 6-8, 12-18 in collaboration with “Thou sections of increasing urgency and immediacy (see verses 3-5, 9-11, 19-21).¹² The puzzle, the cry, and the anguish in the soul of the Psalmist are noticeable in three sections that can be found in form of a lament and petition. First, the expressions in verses 1-5 is a contrast to his experience of the silence of God with the deliverance God provided to the progenitors, and their generations. Second, his experience also in verses 6-11 is a contrast between his present situation and his past experience of the protection of God; while verses 12-21 is a third description of his desperate plight in graphic imagery of the fact that his ordeals almost take him to the grave, notwithstanding, he cried unto God for divine deliverance.¹³

(b) Security under His Canopy in times of loneliness (verses 9-11)

Like the reformer of old, Martin Luther, who in the face of warfare, resorted to the unfailing power of God penned the ever green song: “A mighty fortress is our God,” the psalmist reposed and fixed his mind on God’s glory and fame in the earlier verses of the passage under review. He resorted to his personal lifelong experience of divine care in all his pilgrimages. That is to say that God is not a casual acquaintance to offer just obligatory assistance (Psalms 139:13-

⁷ John I Durham, “Psams,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary volume 4*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1971), 212.

⁸ Baigent, “The Psalms,” 571-572.

⁹ Nupnaga Weanzana, “Psalms,” *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary by 70 African Scholars* ed Tokunboh Adeyemo. (Nairobi: World Alive Publishers, 2006), 634.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries on Psalms 1-72*, 105.

¹³ Baigent, “The Psalms” *The International Bible Commentary with the New International Version*, 572.

16; Job 10:8-12). Trust and safety are like twin brothers that go together in this regard.¹⁴

(c) Rapacious and roaring voice of loneliness” (verses 12-18);

The scenery in verses 12-18 is often enacted, and it is better experienced than explained. It is the situation in which the strong exploit the weak; a gang up of many individual against one individual, a situation in which the crowd is pictured as bestial bulls, lions, dogs, and wild oxen. It is all human experience one way or the other; weather it is actually done or perhaps a picture of the experience at Calvary.¹⁵ One wonders the motives behind these Adamic practices? It ranges from resentment at every petty claim to high mindedness, the compulsion of crowd-mentality (12, 16a, and Ex. 23:2), greed, trivial gains and perverted tastes to enjoy a harrowing spectacle just because sin is murderous, and sinners have hatred in them (Jn 8:44). Verses 14-15 by itself are a description of a mere desperate illness in the context of collective animosity, and the symptoms could be those of Christ's scourging and crucifixion. Verses 16-18 are waiting verses for the events described the unfolding scenario. The verb pierced in verse 16 is intriguing and problematic Hebrew word. The usage in the LXX is strongly supported than the usage in the MT as fallout from the compilations in the centuries before the crucifixion.¹⁶ Baigent is of the opinion that this verb is corrupt in the MT, but rather suggest that the verb suggest “Bind” perhaps for burial. Baigent idea, McCullough, and Taylor goes together. The verb is an indication of the ruthlessness of the enemies' attempt on him compared here to that of a hunter closing in on a wild beast or dragging it off for massacre. They stare and gloat over him because his physical condition indicates the nearness of his end. His death was already anticipated like executioners laying hold on their perquisites.¹⁷

(d) Divine intervention in times lonesomeness” (verses 19-21).

The section under review in this Psalm is perhaps the climax of his resort to divine intervention as he continues to make reference to “Thou” continually, and this has to be the turning point in the whole episode of the psalm. The objective assertion in verses 3-5 “Yet thou” is deliberate. The second (9-11) is less objective; while the third series of urgent cries as the enemies seem to move in with murderous, unclean, ravenous, irresistible rage was incredulous, hence his plea for “my help,” “be not far from me” in verse 19. The time for God to act is acutely short, hence the cry: “hasten to my aid.” The Psalmist at this point is desperately in need of God because he is nearer death than to life. His strength had left him, hence he referenced God as his strength in verse 19a to indicate that the most important feature in this trial is God. Hence he calls for immediate intervention for divine salvation in 22:19b-21. He is

so desperate in his request that he appeals to vow.¹⁸ The dramatic turn in the event of the psalm is a reflection of the reformer's assertion: “a bulwark never failing,” shows evidence that God really attended to him with the very present help in time of trouble (Psalm 46:1). This is quite discernible in the following verses, which form the second part of the psalm according to our division.

Joy at the break of day

The reading from verses 22-31 gives a clear indication that there is a dramatic change in the entire episode of a troubled soul. It does not really matter what actually had happened to his situation, something had happened with in his earth which brings a turnaround in his situation and actions. The psalmist is assured that God has heard him and will deliver him. Hence, he envisaged and embarked upon communal votive act of worship in verses 22-26. He shared his testimonies severally like in Psalms 116:12; “what shall I render unto the Lord for his goodness unto me.” In 40:9f; 66:16ff etc couple with the votive sacrifice in verse 25 are all indicative of dramatic intervention of God in his situation.

The Votive Feast and Worship (verses 22-26)

The setting of the verses under review is indicative of those who vowed some service to God, once their prayer is answered. The response will be to fulfil the vow with a sacrifice and a feast which might last as long as two days according to Leviticus 7:16. The joy of the answered prayer is not meant to be kept, but to be expressed to all and sundry even to the needy folks (26), especially to the Levites, so as to celebrate together and eat with them before the Lord (Dt. 12:17-19). In that celebration, they must tell all the things that God had done for them (22; 40:9; 116:14), beckoning to all and sundry to celebrate together like in Psalm 34:3 and the attendant testimonies. However, Hebrews 2:11-12 verse 22 appears to be an allusion to the Messiah. For the Psalmist, if he is save, he promises to announce the powerful deeds of God to his brothers in faith praise to him in the congregation of God's people. That fulfilment is the bulk of the second section of the Psalm.¹⁹

The Boundless Kingdom of Worshippers. (verses 27-31).

The last five verses reveals Davidic boundless overflow of joy and thanksgiving, because he has experienced a “breakthrough,” which is not only for him as a person, but also shared by several others. The outcome of his deliverance are transcending into the everlastingness. No wonder he had to beckon to his guests and friends, who now spread in time and space until the Lord receives the homage they paid, and even that of the Gentiles, and the proud inclusive. The phrase: “all the fat ones of the earth shall eat and worship is indicative of those who are at present feel self-sufficient, who will put aside their pride to join the humble at the feast (v.26) when they might have seen the emptiness of their pride. They will do this willingly so as to gain the life which is not theirs to command

¹⁴ Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries on Psalms*, 107.

¹⁵ Kidner, 107.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Taylor; and W. Stewart McCullough, “The Book of Psalms,” *The Interpreter's Bible*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 120 - 121.

¹⁸ Weanzana, “Psalms,” 634.

¹⁹ Weanzana, 634.

(v.26c, 29c). The references here are applicable both to the living and the dead respectively like in Philippians 2:10. Lawrence E. Toombs affirms the Hebrew text of these verses are difficult hence it has attracted several emendations, but the readings in the RSV has been most acceptable in some quarters.²⁰ All the ends of the earth ... and all the families of the nations are summoned to take note of what the Lord has done in the life of the Psalmist is also available for all and sundry. Therefore, the hymn moves in an exultant crescendo and comes to a resounding climax in this final stanza encompassing both the living and the dead, living far and near, even the generation that has gone into their reward, or the once unborn. They will all hear, see, and feel the goodness of the Lord, so much that they will celebrate in humble adoration.²¹ Even then, the vision and import of the Psalm extend also to unborn generations (30f), in the sense of which anticipate the preaching of the cross, counting on the righteousness of God, his deliverance, which is actually discernible in His activities. The psalmist who started with cry of dereliction is found ending with the word: "he has done it," a pronouncement that is concomitant to the final cry of the Lord on the cross: "it is finished."²² This is to corroborate the word of the psalmist in another passage that says: "weeping may endure till the night, but joy comes in the morning." The psalmist had learned so many lessons that indicate no matter the challenge of life, God is in the very midst of it to grant deliverance at the very time it is needed. He called him "a very present help in the time of trouble."

Exegetical import of psalm 22

The passage under review has revealed that there cannot but be a good time and a bad time. Our God created all, and he uses it to achieve purpose, yet in any stage or situation a man finds himself, God promise never to abandon his own people. That is why the Psalmist was able to plead his case before God knowing full well that God will surely answer him in the day of trouble (20). In other word, in times of trouble, loneliness, crisis, even death, God is very much present there. He is not on the mountain, or in the plane neither in the valley. He is everywhere. In other word, God is located at the very end of the tunnel of every trouble. For the Psalmist, he was able to locate God in his time of consternation using the instrument of reminder of the acts of God in the past. He uses the instrument to reassure himself of the ever faithfulness, ever surety of divine presence. He also used the instrument of Trust. The instrument of praise is enacted by recourse to history, which indicated that Yahweh has never abandoned his own; neither will he no matter the cloud. The Psalmist was assured of this contrast between his experience, and what he knows of God. He is the praise of Israel, the Mighty one of Israel. The dilemma of where God is now resolved via trust in times of perplexity. Suffice to say therefore, that the book of Psalm is composite for all generations. This is against the background that it expresses deep emotional thought of various mood be it that of joy, sorrow, peace, warfare, friendship, enemy and what

have you. There is hardly any experience anybody has that does not have expression in the Psalms. Even, the Psalms has become a great *didache* for the Christian church, because the Psalmist assisted anybody to vent the un-expressible emotions. Therefore the Christian church over the ages uses the Psalter as a manual of worship, prayers, songs and others both for family individual and corporate worship.²³ African churches are not exceptions. Most African churches teach adherents to use the Psalms in times of trouble. Even, some sleep with open Psalms under their pillow in the night as a Charm to ward off evil around. However the Palmist made it clear that the Psalm will work wonders for those who fear the Lord, descendants of Jacob, descendants of Israel 22:23, and by extension, all the seed of Abraham even by spiritual birth. However, the Psalm is not a mere book of charm, but rather a book of faith in God. Yet, faith in God does not automatically prevent suffering. Jesus himself, the God man went through suffering. Those who follow him will experience the same, but victory is sure, because God is near, ready to provide rescue for those who trust him.

Conclusion

In this paper, the hiding place of God in times of perplexity and several existential experiences are revealed. It examined where God is staying in times of bewilderment using exegetical instrument to analyze Psalm 22, which is broadly categorized into two or three by a couple of scholars. This writer also cast his vote for the two broad divisions with other subheadings under each of the two classifications. The first part is really all-out expression of anguish and a call for God's intervention. The second part reveals a dramatic turn of event compared with the expressions of sorrow and despondency in the first part of the Psalm. The indices of where God is in times of perplexity is partly ability to recast the act of God in the past as an instrument that provoke trust in Yahweh's unfailing love. In other word gratitude to his act in history is an essential instrument to locate God in times of loneliness.

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²⁰ Lawrence E. Toombs, "The Psalms," *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible including the Apocrypha with General Articles*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 268-269.

²¹ Taylor, 122-123.

²² Kidner, 108-109.

²³ Weanzana, 634-635.

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