

## Scripture Readings for Good Friday 2020

### Psalm 22 (Selected verses) NIV

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? <sup>2</sup> My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.

<sup>4</sup> In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. <sup>5</sup> To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame. <sup>6</sup> But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. <sup>7</sup> All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. <sup>8</sup> “He trusts in the LORD,” they say, “let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”

<sup>11</sup> Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

<sup>16</sup> Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. <sup>17</sup> All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. <sup>18</sup> They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.

<sup>19</sup> But you, LORD, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me.

<sup>22</sup> I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you. <sup>23</sup> You who fear the LORD, praise him! <sup>24</sup> For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help. <sup>25</sup> From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you, I will fulfill my vows. <sup>26</sup> The poor will eat and be satisfied; those who seek the LORD will praise him—may your hearts live forever! <sup>27</sup> *All the ends of the earth* will remember and turn to the LORD, and *all the families of the nations* will bow down before him, <sup>28</sup> for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations.

<sup>31</sup> They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!

### Matthew 27:33-54 NIV

<sup>33</sup> They came to a place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). <sup>34</sup> There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. <sup>35</sup> When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. <sup>36</sup> And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. <sup>37</sup> Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.

<sup>38</sup> Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>39</sup> Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads <sup>40</sup> and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” <sup>41</sup> In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. <sup>42</sup> “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will

believe in him. <sup>43</sup> He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" <sup>44</sup> In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

<sup>45</sup> From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. <sup>46</sup> About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). <sup>47</sup> When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah." <sup>48</sup> Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. <sup>49</sup> The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." <sup>50</sup> And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

<sup>51</sup> At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split <sup>52</sup> and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. <sup>53</sup> They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. <sup>54</sup> When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

## A Reflection for Good Friday

There are so many aspects of the events of Good Friday that we could explore, and many perspectives from the characters in the story to consider. For example, there's Judas Iscariot, Pontius Pilate, Barabbas, the Jewish high priests, the crowds, the Roman soldiers, as well as the friends and family of Jesus. But today I just want to look at Matthew's account of Jesus on the cross and focus on two things.

The first is the words of Jesus on the cross "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani,*" which is the first line of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>1</sup> For Matthew, these are the *only* words that he records of Jesus from the cross, and there are various ways to interpret and understand them. On one level they are a desperate cry of anguish and distress from a man who is suffering in agony the slow torturous death of crucifixion. In our present crisis, and in previous times of personal suffering, many have cried out, "God, where are you?" "God, do something!" It's an appropriate prayer and, if Jesus said it, then it's clearly *not* sacrilegious! The trouble is, what we usually want God to do is to *fix* our problems in the way that we *want*, preferably by us avoiding suffering altogether! If we're not careful, our attitude can be in-keeping with those who mocked Jesus as he was on the cross: "*If you are who you say you are, then come down from the cross and we will believe in you.*" Our condition for believing in God is that he does *our* will. Or, only if God proves himself in the way *we* demand will we believe in

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew goes on to explain that some bystanders heard it and thought that Jesus was calling for "Elias," short for Elijah. And Elijah-type figure was meant to be the forerunner of the Messiah and so some wondered whether this is Elijah-figure would, at the last minute, rescue Jesus from the cross. Matthew's readers know that John the Baptist was that Elijah figure, the one who was preparing the way of the Lord (Matt 11:14).

him. And, consequently, if the miracle we want doesn't happen, we conclude God does not exist. Faith is *not* that simple and God doesn't dance to our tune!

In this world we *will* have trouble<sup>2</sup> and we *will* experience suffering. So, what words or music do we have to express our anguish when life is hard? There is, I think, a tendency in contemporary worship songs to deny the reality of suffering by not giving us the voice or the tools to express our real and legitimate emotions at such times.<sup>3</sup> We need to be able to cry out as a community of faith, "God, this is *not* the way the world should be!" The Jews understood this full well and they have psalms of lament through which the individual or the nation can express their frustration towards God for their present circumstances.<sup>4</sup> Jewish writers understood that their promise-keeping God was big enough to rage against—and gracious enough not to retaliate. We Christians need to embrace such texts and be free to lament!

Consider Psalm 13, which begins: "How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"<sup>5</sup> Or the words of lament from Job: "How long will you torment me. . .? Though I cry, 'Violence!' I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice."<sup>6</sup> There are many poetic songs and prayers Jesus *could* have recited, but he chose Psalm 22 – parts of which were read earlier.<sup>7</sup> It seems that Jesus is pointing to this particular psalm, not just to express his deeply personal anguish, but as a further sign that reveals *who he is* - even as he is dying. I am *not* attempting to romanticize or spiritualize these words of Jesus and so gloss over the very real physical suffering that Jesus was experiencing. *Through* these poetic words, however, we get a hint that his death would not *just* be a human tragedy, though it certainly was that, but that good would come out of evil in ways that no one could comprehend - or anticipate - at the time.

It is important to note that in those days, when a text from scripture was cited, it was pointing to the *whole* psalm<sup>8</sup> and not just cherry-picking a particular verse to express one's feelings. Reciting a psalm is, then, could be as natural as saying the Lord's Prayer. One of the things that's evident in Psalm 22 is that the writer is *not* addressing God as the "God of Israel" or as the "Creator God," although both titles are true, but he is referring to God as "*my* God." He may feel that God has utterly abandoned him, that God does *not* answer his prayers, that he *cannot* find peace, that he *is* alone, but is still holds on by the thinnest of threads to "*my* God." There is a personal relationship between the person and God, and however strained that is at this time, he still refers to God in that way. The prayer continues "Do not be far from me, for my trouble is near there is no one to help."

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<sup>2</sup> See John 16:33.

<sup>3</sup> On this note, musician and songwriter Adrian Snell incorporates lament in his music, see: <https://www.adrian-snell.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> For examples of laments, see: Psalms 12, 13, 22, 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 85, and 90, Jeremiah 12:1–4; 15:10, 15–18; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–18, and Lamentations. Such psalms of lament could be expressed by an individual or used in *communal liturgy*. (Naturally, many people go to Psalm 23 for words of comfort in hard times, reciting, "the Lord is my Shepherd . . .")

<sup>5</sup> Ps 13:1.

<sup>6</sup> Job 19:1,7. See also Job 23:1-10.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew alludes to it several times, as do the other gospels. This psalm was seen as messianic and fulfilled in Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> Or prophetic text or passage.

One of the great things about psalms of lament is that they give us the words to express our raw emotions at times of crisis. Saying the psalm out loud does *not* solve the crisis but it reminds us that we trust in a God of promises who will not abandon us, even if we feel like he has.<sup>9</sup> The typical style of a Jewish lament has, at the conclusion, an expression of faith and hope even if the problem is completely unresolved. This particular psalm ends in words that are powerfully messianic and indicate that God's vindication *will* take place: "*All the ends of the earth* will remember and turn to the LORD, and *all the families of the nations* will bow down before him."<sup>10</sup> Matthew sees these verses as beginning to be fulfilled through the words of the non-Jewish centurion who witnessed all that took place and concluded, "Truly this man *was* the Son of God."<sup>11</sup>

The second thing I want to mention is that the dominant symbol of Christianity throughout history has been the *cross*. That's odd if you think about it, why would you have a symbol of torture as the mark of your faith? St. Paul says that "he preached Christ *crucified*."<sup>12</sup> Too often as Christians we leap to Easter Sunday, understandably so, but something of real importance *happened on Good Friday*. Of course, Jesus would *not* have died that day had not first *lived the life he did*. It was his life - his message, his actions - that led to his death. In the earlier reading, Matthew tells us - with some foreboding - that it was *dark* from noon until three in the afternoon. This sets the scene that something important is about to happen.

Earlier we are told that Jesus was mocked, "You said you would destroy the Temple and build in three days, save yourself!"<sup>13</sup> Matthew tells us that *just* after Jesus died, the Temple curtain was ripped in two from top to bottom.<sup>14</sup> Part of what this means is that the *function* of the Temple had ended. You see, the Temple was understood to be the place where God's presence resided, it was where heaven and Earth were joined, so to speak. In was there that the "glory" of God was most intense.<sup>15</sup> Only one day a year, the High Priest would go beyond the curtain into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to present the sacrifice for the sins of the nation. The destruction of that curtain, whether real or symbolic, shows that with the death of Jesus, this important Temple function ceased to be relevant.<sup>16</sup> The death

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<sup>9</sup> See Rom 8:38-39 for a similar (Christianised) statement of confidence (in the context of Paul's lament in Romans 8).

<sup>10</sup> Ps 22:27 onwards.

<sup>11</sup> Matt 27:54 - so fulfilling in miniature the end of Ps 22. (This is also pre-figures the great commission: Matt 28:18-20.) In the context of the mocking crowds and the Roman centurion, see also John 1: 10-12.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor 1:23-25. Theologically, the cross *cannot* be separated from the resurrection (nor the life of Jesus), but the *crucifixion* (and the resurrection for that matter) was "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." The *way* Jesus died was offensive to Gentiles (non-Jews) because crucifixion meant Jesus was deemed a *criminal*, for Jews, he was *cursed*.

<sup>13</sup> See Matt 27:40. See also Matt 26:61; Mark 14:57-58; John 2:19-21.

<sup>14</sup> Matt 27:51. (See also Mark 1:38; Luke 23:45; and Heb 9:1-14; 10:19-20.) Uniquely in Matt 17:52, there is mention of the tombs being opened of the righteous dead being resurrected. This is a (visionary?) *glimpse of the future in the present* - also taking place on Good Friday. That God will indeed vindicate the righteous dead on the Last Day was part of the great Jewish eschatological hope (e.g., Ezek 37:1-15). Good Friday saw a glimpse of that future in the present, though Matthew is careful to say that it was only *after* the resurrection of Jesus that such people came *out* of their tombs and entered Jerusalem and appeared to many!

<sup>15</sup> There is a peculiarity here in that prior to the original Temple's destruction, Ezekiel had a vision of God's spirit (presence/"glory") leaving the Temple. But when it is later rebuilt, after the exile, there is no similar vision of God's presence returning.

<sup>16</sup> Whether this was a result of the earthquake or not, the implication is that this was *God's* doing.

Jesus changed *everything!*<sup>17</sup> It also demonstrated that, because of the death of Jesus, everyone now has *direct access to God* – we no longer needed to go through a mediator or Priest. Put another way, Jesus is *now* our High Priest,<sup>18</sup> as well as our king. And note that this tearing of the Temple curtain happened *on Good Friday, not* Easter Sunday.

At the very beginning of John’s gospel, we read the following: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his *glory*, the *glory* as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”<sup>19</sup> John understood that God’s Glory – or presence - is *not* in the Temple, but *in* his Son, Jesus Christ. Later, Paul goes on to talk about the Church, all those who follow Jesus, as being the “body of Christ”<sup>20</sup> and that our bodies are the “Temple of the Holy Spirit,” or the living presence of God.<sup>21</sup> The tearing of the Temple curtain profoundly changes our understanding of God’s glory or presence in the world. This is *not* an academic detail, this is built in to the very meaning of baptism and the life of the church.

In conclusion, Good Friday is *not* the end of the Jesus story, but it’s a crucial part that we can’t afford to gloss over. Oddly, it is in tragedies we can sometimes discover God at work unsurprising ways. That is certainly true of the Easter story. The writer, Dorothy L Sayers, puts it this way: “God did *not* abolish the fact of evil: he *transformed* it. He did *not* stop the crucifixion: he rose from the dead.” Amen. Let us pray.

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<sup>17</sup> Remember that Matthew wrote his gospel *after* the physical destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. Although Jewish Christians still worshipped in the Temple prior to that event, the Temple *itself* did not have the same significance.

<sup>18</sup> See Heb 4:14-16. This is major theme in Hebrews; moreover, Jesus is also the (final) sacrifice as well as High Priest.

<sup>19</sup> John 1:14, 18.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Cor 10:16-16; 12:12-31; 2 Cor 6:16; Rom 12:4-5; John 2:19-22; See also John 14:3.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Cor 6:19. See also Acts 7:48