# Psalm 22 | Jesus

*Session 5 · October 30, 2025 · Singing in the Dark · Epiphany Seattle*

## Context — When, Where, and Who

- **Book:** Book I (Psalms 1–41). The most personal and Davidic book. Psalm 22 is its emotional nadir — the deepest cry before any resolution. It sits between Psalm 21 (royal triumph) and Psalm 23 (the shepherd psalm).
- **Date:** Attributed to David. Superscription: "To the choirmaster: according to The Doe of the Dawn" — a musical notation, likely a tune name. Probably 10th century BCE.
- **Author:** David. The suffering is individual, but the psalm became the community's primary liturgy for any experience of total abandonment — and ultimately the church's interpretation of the cross.
- **Type:** Individual Lament — the fullest and most developed lament in the entire Psalter. Uniquely, its praise section (vv.22–31) is a full third of the text, expanding to cosmic scope.

*Psalm 22 is the most quoted psalm in the New Testament. No psalm is cited more in the passion narratives. The gospel writers use it as the primary interpretive lens for the crucifixion — not as background but as the framework for understanding what the cross means.*

## Poetic Structure — How the Psalm Is Built

- **Form:** Classic lament structure — but extended and transformed. The oscillation between lament and trust in vv.1–11 holds both realities simultaneously. This is not contradiction. It is the deepest form of faith: trusting even while feeling abandoned.
- **Movement:** Three-part arc: Lament (vv.1–21a, framed by "you do not answer" in v.2 and "you have answered me" at v.21); Praise (vv.22–26, the community gathers); Expansion (vv.27–31, all nations, all generations, all the dead).
- **Sounds Like:** Isaiah 53 — the Suffering Servant. The two texts form a canonical pair: despised, rejected, physically tormented, ultimately vindicated. Together they describe suffering as the very shape of redemption.
- **Notice:** The pivot at verse 21b is given without explanation. "Save me from the mouth of the lion" — then: "you have answered me" (NRSV margin). The rescue arrives but is not explained. That gap is where resurrection lives.

*The final Hebrew word of Psalm 22 is "asah" — he has done it. The NRSV renders it in a full sentence, but the stark Hebrew is simply those three words. An echo, deliberate or not, of John 19:30: "Tetelestai — It is finished."*

## Four Words Worth Sitting With

### Azab (v.1)

Forsake / abandon / leave. Not destroyed — left. Left unprotected in a place of danger. The same word in Genesis 2:24: a man leaving father and mother. The most intimate departure imaginable.

### Rachaq (v.1)

"Why are you so far from helping me?" Spatial absence paired with azab: departure and distance together. God has left and is far. Jesus prayed this in Aramaic: "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani."

### Ka'aru (v.16)

"They have pierced my hands and my feet." The most contested phrase in the psalm. Masoretic Text: ka'ari (like a lion). Septuagint and Dead Sea Scroll 11QPsa: ka'aru (they have pierced). One letter difference: waw vs. yod. Both readings are ancient. The Dead Sea Scroll evidence slightly favors "pierced."

### Anah (v.21)

"You have answered me" — the NRSV margin note at verse 21b. The standard Hebrew word for divine response to prayer. This is the pivot of the entire psalm: the lament ends, the rescue is declared, and no reason is given. Faith does not always receive explanations. It receives the turn.

## The Shape of the Psalm — Into the Text

- **vv.1–11 Lament and Trust:** The psalm oscillates: abandonment (vv.1–2), trust in the God of the ancestors (vv.3–5), humiliation (vv.6–8), trust in the God who has known this sufferer since birth (vv.9–11). Both held simultaneously.
- **vv.12–18 The Body Under Attack:** "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax." Then thirst, dust, the approach of death. And the division of garments, the casting of lots — enacted at Calvary (John 19:24).
- **vv.19–21 The Petition:** "Do not be far from me." Three urgent petitions. Then the unexplained turn: "you have answered me." The lament simply ends. The rescue is declared.
- **vv.22–26 The Vow of Praise:** "I will tell of your name to my brothers." The sufferer becomes the witness. The congregation gathers. The poor eat and are satisfied. Quoted in Hebrews 2:12 as Jesus's own voice: he is the speaker, not merely the subject.
- **vv.27–31 Cosmic Scope:** All ends of the earth. All families of nations. Those asleep in the dust. Those yet unborn. The rescue of one becomes the proclamation to all of history. And the final word: "he has done it."

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## Jesus and the Holy Spirit in Psalm 22

### Jesus as the Speaker of the Psalm

Hebrews 2:12 quotes Psalm 22:22 and attributes it to Jesus: "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." The writer of Hebrews is making an explicit claim: Jesus is not merely the subject of Psalm 22. He is its speaker. He prays the lament. He endures the abandonment. He proclaims the praise.

*When Jesus cries verse 1 from the cross (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34), he is not quoting a relevant passage. He is beginning a psalm he knows by heart, whose arc he is living, and whose ending he knows. The cry of dereliction is also the invocation of the resurrection.*

### The Cross as Psalm 22 Enacted

Matthew 27 draws on Psalm 22 at four specific points, using the psalm's language to frame the passion narrative:

- **v.7 (Ps 22:7):** "All who see me mock me" — Matthew 27:39: "those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads."
- **v.8 (Ps 22:8):** "He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him" — Matthew 27:43: "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now."
- **v.18 (Ps 22:18):** "they divide my garments... and for my clothing they cast lots" — Matthew 27:35: "they divided his garments among them by casting lots."
- **v.1 (Ps 22:1):** "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" — Matthew 27:46: "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"

*The gospel writers are not decorating the passion with psalm quotations. They are arguing that Psalm 22 is the grammar of the cross — the text that reveals what the crucifixion means.*

### The Holy Spirit in the Lament

Romans 8:26: "The Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." The groaning of Psalm 22 — "I cry by day but you do not answer; by night, but find no rest" — becomes the Spirit's own intercession. The Spirit does not rescue the psalmist from the darkness of lament. The Spirit is the groan inside the darkness, carrying it before God.

### The Trinitarian Reading

*Psalm 22 is the only place in the Psalter where the one who cries to God sounds as though the relationship between them has broken down. Christian theology has understood this as the Son taking into himself the full weight of human God-forsakenness — entering the abandonment that sin creates, so that no human who prays this psalm prays it alone. The cross is not God watching suffering from a distance. It is God praying Psalm 22.*

## The BCP Translation — A Note

Coverdale renders "the words of my groaning" (NRSV) as "the words of my distress." The NRSV is more physiological — the sounds of a body in pain. Coverdale is more interior — the anguish of the whole person. Jesus's cry was both.

*Psalm 22 is appointed in the BCP for Good Friday and has been read aloud in Anglican worship on that day since 1549. To read it in that context is not to study the psalm but to pray it — to stand where Jesus stood and enter the darkness with him.*

## The Controversy at Verse 16

The translation of verse 16b is one of the most contested in biblical studies. The Masoretic Text (standard Hebrew) reads ka'ari: "like a lion at my hands and my feet." The Septuagint (Greek) and the Dead Sea Scroll 11QPsa read ka'aru: "they have pierced my hands and my feet."

*The difference is one Hebrew letter — waw (vav) vs. yod — and both readings are ancient. The Dead Sea Scroll evidence, published definitively by Shon Hopkin in BYU Studies Quarterly (2005), slightly favors "pierced." Even under the lion-reading, the imagery describes violent attack on the psalmist's extremities. The theological resonance with crucifixion does not disappear. It becomes less directly anatomical but no less violent.*

## Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53

The two great Old Testament texts of suffering and vindication read each other across the canon. Isaiah 53: despised and rejected, familiar with suffering, bearing our griefs. Psalm 22: scorned and despised, bones out of joint, surrounded by enemies. Both move from torment to vindication. The early church read them as a pair — prose prophecy and sung prayer, both pointing toward the same shape of redemption.

## A Word to Take Home

"The psalm that begins 'why have you forsaken me' ends with every generation proclaiming 'he has done it.' That is the arc of Christian faith. It is not a straight line. It passes through the cry. But it does not end there."

**Next session: Psalm 90 | Death | November 6**