

Item #8

Psalm 22, the Faith of Jesus and Christian Justification

JAMES SWETNAM, S.J.

This Item was originally Entry 55 in my previous website. It is here reproduced with slight modification but with a major addendum.

Introduction

The present paper will sketch in three parts a new approach to the problem of understanding Christian justification—being in the relation with God that He wants us to be.

Part One will indicate how Mark (and Matthew), following Jesus' own lead, presents the death of Jesus on the cross as involving the subjective faith of Jesus in the face of death.

Part Two will indicate how Paul gives evidence of viewing the subjective faith of Jesus as involving justification.

Part Three will indicate how Paul sums up justification in the Old Dispensation and in the New.

Part One: Psalm 22 and the Death of Jesus in Mark/Matthew

The key to understanding the death of Jesus according to Mark/Matthew would seem to be the cry of Jesus recorded by Jesus at Mk 15,34 / Mt 27,46: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" A respectable body of New Testament exegesis understands this

cry as an indication that the entire body of the psalm¹ should be used to understand what is taking place.² The resulting understanding views the first part of the psalm (vv. 2-21) as involving an interplay between the anguished cry of the psalmist (possibly David himself) and his repeated expressions of a profound faith-trust in God's power to save him.

vv. 2-3: anguish

vv. 4-6: trust

vv. 7-9: anguish

vv. 10-12 trust

vv. 13-19 anguish

vv. 20-22 trust

This interplay leaves the final situation of the psalmist unanswered, and thus prepares the way for the second and final part, which constitutes in whole or in part a *tôdâ* prayer.

A *tôdâ* prayer is part of an Old Dispensation ritual called the *zēbach tôdâ* (זִבְחַ תְּדָוָה), a “sacrifice of thanksgiving” or a “sacrifice of

¹ In the Septuagint text of Ps 22 v. 1 is an introductory explanation. The text of the psalm begins properly in v. 2 with the verse uttered by Jesus. But this numbering may vary from one translation to another, with the attendant variation in the following verses. In this article the Septuagint numbering will be followed, with the text of the psalm beginning with v. 2.

² The foundational work is H. Gese, “Psalm 22 und das Neue Testament: Der älteste Berichte von Tode Jesu und die Entstehung des Herrenmahles”, in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* NF 65 (1968), pp. 1-22 = *Vom Sinai zum Zion* (Beiträge zur evangelische Theologie, 64: Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1974), pp. 180-201. The article has gone through new editions and has given rise to numerous published comments, many of which may be found on the web.

praise". This ritual had three major physical components: 1) a bloody holocaust on the Temple altar; 2) a ritual consumption of bread; 3) hymns and prayers. The accompanying psychological component was praise/thanksgiving to almighty God in a public setting for a signal act of benevolence as regards the Israeli male who arranged for the ceremony. Such signal acts could be either past or future, and could consist of such things as salvation from death in war or in famine. Obviously a strong faith-trust in God and His Providence for the one offering was the basis for such a psychological component

As used by Jesus as reported by Mark/Matthew, Ps 22 indicates that what is happening to Jesus on the cross is the bloody sacrifice which takes the place of the holocausts in the temple. The other two parts of the *tôdâ* ceremony were enacted at the Last Supper with His apostles. The cry of Jesus in citing Ps 22 as the official interpretation of what is taking place thus completes the inauguration of the Christian *tôdâ*, i.e., the Eucharist as sacrifice.³ Thus the three physical components of the Christian *tôdâ* are: 1) Jesus' bloody death on the cross; 2) a ritual consumption of bread; 3) hymns and prayers. The accompanying psychological component at the institution of the Christian *tôdâ* was the faith-trust that Jesus had in God's ability to save Him from death even after His foreseen death on the cross, together with His faith-trust as a child of Abraham in God's ability to

³ In the New Testament the Eucharist also is presented as the Divine Presence, related to, but obviously not independent of, the Eucharist as sacrifice. The view that the New Testament Eucharist is the fulfillment of the Old Testament puts paid to the view that the Christian Eucharist is a Communion Service and not a Sacrifice.

save from death as He had saved Isaac from death, i.e., God's ability to save a life other than Jesus' own. Thus the Christian *tôdâ*, i.e., the Eucharist, is in continuity with the Jewish *tôdâ*, but in discontinuity with it as well in the sense that the Eucharist is the definitive fulfillment of the Jewish *tôdâ*.⁴

The view that the second half of Ps 22, that is, vv. 23-32, involves a Christian *tôdâ* prayer, would seem to imply a number of Christian interpretations of the text. First and foremost, it implies:

1) that Jesus has died on the cross and is risen from the dead by a signal act of God's free choice in response to the faith-trust placed in such an act by Jesus;⁵

2) that this death of Jesus on the cross has supplied the third element needed for the completion of the Christian *tôdâ*, the other two elements having been supplied by Jesus at the Last Supper;

3) that what Jesus is doing is celebrating the first Mass, which He does from the right hand of His Father in heaven, His rightful

⁴ J. Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy*. Translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986 [Reprint 2006]). [Translation of J. Ratzinger, *Das Fest des Glaubens. Versuche zur Theologie des Gottesdienstes* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1981)]. In an extended presentation (Postscript 2, pp. 51-60) Ratzinger indicates the source of contemporary discussion of the *tôdâ* and states that in his opinion the Jewish *tôdâ* ceremony is far and away the most likely principal Old Dispensation basis for the Christian *tôdâ*: "It seems to me that his [i.e., H. Gese's] central insight, that is, the close connection between *tôdâ* sacrifice and Eucharist, *tôdâ* spirituality and Christology, is completely sound. The close connection made, in the New Testament tradition, between the *tôdâ* psalms and Christology, the structural unity between these psalms and the content of the Eucharist—these things are so obvious that, on the basis of the New Testament texts, they cannot be disputed" (pp. 59-60).

⁵ The act of saving Jesus could have taken various forms involving various consequences and therein lies the freedom. As it turned out the choice involved not only Jesus but the entire human race. Cf. Heb 5,8b in the context of Heb 10,5-7. Jesus was already obedient when He came into the world. In the act of offering Himself in death He learned the effects of this obedience.

place as High Priest, inasmuch as in the Eucharist He is both Priest and Victim (cf. Heb 7,27), and by implication this death is expiatory;

4) that the name announced by Jesus is “Father”, for in the resurrection His divine nature is manifest as Son (cf. Rom 1,4);

5) that the ceremony of the Mass is being celebrated in the midst of “the assembly”, i.e., the church (the Greek is ἐκκλησία — v. 23);

6) that the “kingdom of God” (βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ)⁶ comes with the resurrection of Jesus, i.e., the risen Jesus now stands outside time (v. 29), so that His saving power can be applied to all humans who ever lived (v. 28), present (v. 28), past (v. 30), and future (vv. 31-32).

Thus the indication by Jesus that His death is to be interpreted in the light of Ps 22 brings with it a wealth of theological implications. But by reason of the elaborate preparation given in vv. 2-21, the emphasis of the psalm would seem to be on the faith-trust of Jesus in the face of His impending death.

Part Two: *The Faith IN Jesus and the Faith OF Jesus*

There has been much discussion in recent years about the possibility of certain Pauline texts being interpreted in the sense that in the New Testament not only does the faith of the Christian *in* Jesus figure, but the faith *of* Jesus as well. Part One above gives an outline of how the

⁶ The “kingdom of God” would seem to be much broader than the Church, though the Church is a temporal part of it.

interpretation of Ps 22 involving the Christian *tôdâ* all but demands that Jesus have faith-trust in His Father's act of saving Him from death.

The existence of Pauline texts stating that Jesus had faith is disputed. Part of the problem is the refusal of those who deny the existence of texts showing the subjective faith of Jesus to make a basic distinction between Jesus as divine and human. It obviously makes no sense to say that Jesus as divine has trust in God. But the same cannot be said of Jesus as human. When this distinction is made, several Pauline texts become quite clear. Some Pauline texts showing the subjective faith *of* Jesus, i.e., the faith of Jesus:

a. *Galatians 2,15-16*

2,15 Ἡμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἐθνῶν
 ἀμαρτωλοί· 2,16 εἰδότες [δέ] ὅτι οὐ δικαιοῦται
 ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἔργων νόμου ἐὰν μὴ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ
 Χριστοῦ, καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐπιστεῦσαμεν,
 ἵνα δικαιωθῶμεν ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων
 νόμου ὅτι ἐξ ἔργων νόμου οὐ δικαιωθήσεται πᾶσα σὰρξ.⁷

2,15 We are Jews by birth and not sinners from among the
 Gentiles, 2,16 aware that a person is not justified by
 works of the Law but through the faith of Jesus Christ, and we
 have believed in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by the
 faith of Christ and not by works of the Law, because by works

⁷ Greek text after Nestle–Aland²⁸.

of the Law no earthly flesh will be justified.⁸

If this passage is presented according to the obvious concentric pattern that governs the passage's structure, the result is as follows:

A οὐ ... ἐξ ἔργων νόμου

B διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

C εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐπιστεύσαμεν

B' ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ

A' οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου

A a person is *not* justified *by works of the Law*

B but through the faith *of* Jesus Christ

C and we have believed *in* Christ Jesus

B' that we may be justified by the faith *of* Christ

A' and *not* by works *of the Law*.⁹

The pattern is thus:

A not by works of the Law

B the faith of Jesus Christ

C faith in Jesus Christ

B' the faith of Jesus Christ

A' not by works of the Law

On the basis of the concentric pattern alone it would be difficult to

⁸ Translations of Greek texts in the article are by the present writer.

⁹ Cf. the website "Baxter's Ongoing Thoughts" (<http://baxterkruger.blogspot.com>) for November, 2008. The author's full name is C. Baxter Kruger.

justify the meaning “faith in Jesus Christ” in B and B’, for this results in an unacceptable redundancy in the context of C.¹⁰

b. *Romans 3,22*

δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς
πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας

... the justification of God [stands manifest] through the
faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe.

Here the mention of the faith *in* Jesus Christ, implicit in the phrase “for all who believe”, suggests that the genitive in the “Jesus Christ” of the preceding phrase be taken as subjective, not objective. c.

Galatians 3,22

ἀλλὰ συνέκλεισεν ἡ γραφή τὰ πάντα ὑπὸ ἁμαρτίαν, ἵνα
ἡ ἐπαγγελία ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ δοθῇ τοῖς πιστεύουσιν.

But Scripture enclosed all things under sin so that through the
faith of Jesus Christ the promise might be given to those who
believe.

Here the phrase ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ would seem to be in contrast with the phrase τοῖς πιστεύουσιν, with the former referring to the subjective faith of Jesus and the latter referring to those who believe in him and, with this belief in him, belief in his subjective faith as well.

Part Three: *Romans 1,16-17 and Justification in the Bible*

¹⁰ Cf. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75 (2013), pp. 816-817.

1,16 Οὐ γὰρ ἐπαισχύνομαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον. δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐστὶν εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι, Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἕλληνι. 1,17 δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, καθὼς γέγραπται· ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται.

1,16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for Jew, and then for Greek. 1,17 For in it is revealed the justification of God from faith to faith, as it is written, “He who is justified by faith will live”.

In the light of the preceding two parts this famous passage would seem to be susceptible to an interpretation radically different from those commonly accepted.¹¹ Inasmuch as the fundamental notion of “justification” is involved, this possibility is not without its importance.

The preceding two parts have established the plausibility that Jesus as man had a subjective faith in His Father’s ability to save Him from death and that according to Mark and Matthew had called attention to this faith as He was about to die on the cross (Part One). Further, Paul was well aware of this subjective faith and had made use

¹¹ Fitzmyer considers two interpretations as “mainly current”: 1) “from a beginning faith to a more perfect faith” and 2) “through faith and for faith” (J. A. Fitzmyer, “The Letter to the Romans”, in R. E. Brown – J. A. Fitzmyer – R. E. Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), § 51:21 [p. 834]).

of it in his presentation of what was involved in faith *in* Jesus (Part Two). In this third part an attempt will be made to show that the phrase “from faith to faith” (ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν) involves two subjective faiths in the face of death: Abraham’s faith in God’s ability to raise his son Isaac from the dead and Jesus’ faith in God’s ability to raise himself from the dead. As understood in the Epistle to the Hebrews,¹² these two faiths are represented in 2,5 – 3,6.

Abraham’s faith is based on his passing the test of being asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. This test is outlined briefly in Heb 11,17-19. Abraham’s motivation for his faith is given in v. 19: “reasoning that God was able to raise from the dead”. And his receiving Isaac back from the dead, so to speak, is looked on as a veiled prophecy of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.¹³

The fact that Jesus had faith is explicitly expressed in Hebrews in 2,13a where the Greek states ἐγὼ ἔσομαι πεποιθὼς ἐπ’ αὐτῷ—“I shall be trusting in Him”. This text must be understood of Jesus as human: it makes no sense to say that Jesus as divine has faith in God (the divinity of Jesus is a truth fully recognized in Hebrews and clearly distinguished from His humanity). In Hebrews the context of this mention of the faith of Jesus in God indicates that the faith of Jesus was part of His psychological attitude both before His

¹² The present writer considers the Hebrews to be written by St. Paul. But, be that as it may, the epistle is generally considered to the Pauline in content.

¹³ The exegesis of a key text of Hebrews on which the argumentation in the present paper is based may be found in J. Swetnam, “ἐξ ἐνόσ in Hebrews 2,11”, *Biblica* 88 (2007), pp. 517-525.

crucifixion and after His resurrection. That is to say, not only was faith a virtue in Jesus *before* His crucifixion, but it exists now vindicated or “justified” in the risen Jesus *after* His resurrection.¹⁴ By belief *in* Jesus the Christian therefore becomes a participant in the faith *of* Jesus with all that this implies as regards God’s approval of all that Jesus said and did. Here would seem to be the heart of justification for the Christian and the reason why Paul is not “ashamed” of the Gospel (Rom 1,17). Abraham’s justification¹⁵ was based on God’s ability to raise from the dead, but this was an incomplete justification just as Isaac’s “resurrection” from the dead was an incomplete resurrection. Only with the fulfillment of the foreshadowing in Isaac was full justification achieved for the human race.¹⁶

¹⁴ J. Swetnam, Article: “The Crux at Hebrews 2,9 in Its Context”, *Biblica* 91 (2010), pp. 103-111.

¹⁵ Abraham’s justification through faith is first mentioned in Gen 15,6. The note in the *New Jerusalem Bibl*, *ad loc.*, puts the matter well: “The faith of Abraham is an act of trust in a promise which, humanly speaking, could never be realised. God acknowledges that this act is worthy of reward (see Dt 24:13; Ps 106:31), accrediting it to Abraham’s ‘uprightness’, namely to that sum of integrity and humble submission which makes someone pleasing to God. Paul uses this text to prove that uprightness depends on faith and not on the works of the Law; but since Abraham’s faith was the mainspring of his conduct, the letter of James cites this same text when it condemns ‘dead’ faith, i.e., faith without the works that spring from it”.

Gen 22,1-18 is an account of Abraham’s faith when “put to the test”, i.e., put to the test of whether it is alive or dead. He passes the test and hence his faith becomes constitutive for all of his spiritual descendants, that is all who, like Abraham, believe. These are the persons whom Paul reckons as the true Israel.

¹⁶ This paper is obviously just a sketch. An adequate presentation of the problem and its solution demands a much lengthier treatment. For example, an adequate presentation would also demand an explanation of how the forgiveness of sins for humans takes place, when it is not in question for the risen Jesus in His being justified.

Thus the first “faith” in the phrase “from faith to faith” refers to the faith of Abraham at the sacrifice of Isaac (a faith which is attested as genuine by his putting it into practice—cf. James 3,21-24). And the second “faith” refers to the faith of Jesus in the face of His own death.

Subsequent modification: The above study distinguishes Jesus as divine from Jesus as human, inferring that Jesus as human could have faith. But given the inference that Jesus as human enjoyed the Beatific Vision Jesus could not have had faith. But this problem can be solved thinking that Jesus had “faithfulness”, i.e., faithfulness to the model given Him by Isaac in Gen 22 and passed on in Jewish tradition. **(14 April 2019)**