

# Lent Study 2018

## Introduction to Lent

Lent is the period beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending at Easter, during which Christians have traditionally fasted and devoted themselves to prayer in anticipation of Christ's death and resurrection. Just as Jesus fasted and prayed in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights (Matthew 4:1-11), so too do Christians fast and pray for the same forty days and nights.<sup>1</sup> In the same way that Jesus' time of fasting prepared him for his ministry - a ministry which led him to the cross - so we use it as a time to prepare ourselves, to be tested, and to walk with Jesus to the cross.

Fasting is, of course, not very popular these days. We don't like to deny ourselves anything, which is perhaps why it's especially good for us to fast. Traditionally fasting literally meant abstaining from food for some period (or skipping a meal or certain foods). Among other things, this kind of fasting makes us aware that we are creatures who need our daily bread to survive, and it presents an opportunity to pray. Our hunger can be redirected to God.

Fasting from food is not the only possibility and today many decide to give up something (like alcohol, television, Facebook, etc.) which also creates both the space and the reminder to pray and to remember our need for God. In this spirit, many also decide to *add* something during Lent, like a spiritual discipline (i.e., praying every morning) or an act of service.

Whatever we decide to give up - or add - it should be a real sacrifice, even if a small one. It is ok - even good - for us to "suffer" a little, not least because it focuses our thoughts on Christ's own suffering. But just as Christ's own suffering on Good Friday makes Easter possible, so too do we trust that, during Lent, our own sacrifices, through Christ, will lead to new life. And if these Lenten practices bear fruit, they can certainly be continued after Easter! So I encourage you to consider what you might do for Lent this year.

In this year's Lent study we're going to look at seven Psalms seven psalms which lead us to the cross. The words of several psalms were found on Jesus' lips during his passion, for they not only give content and shape to his mission but - probably more importantly - they are expressive. Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks, and Jesus' heart was full of the psalms. The psalms apparently were crucial in his struggle to remain faithful in the midst of suffering, and the psalms can do the same for us.

## Week 1 / Psalm 25:1-10

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<sup>1</sup> There are, however, forty-six days during Lent because the Sundays do not count as its considered improper to fast on the Lord's Day (at least by Protestants and Catholics - the Orthodox Church celebrates Lent over forty days). This means that, if you fast during Lent, you're allowed - even encouraged - to break your fast during the six Sundays because these are all like "little Easters".

- 1 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
- 2 O my God, in you I trust;  
do not let me be put to shame;  
do not let my enemies exult over me.
- 3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;  
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
  
- 4 Make me to know your ways, O Lord;  
teach me your paths.
- 5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long.
  
- 6 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,  
for they have been from of old.
- 7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love remember me,  
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!
  
- 8 Good and upright is the Lord;  
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
- 9 He leads the humble in what is right,  
and teaches the humble his way.
- 10 All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,  
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Although the Psalms were written by different people at different time and for different purposes, they are still several themes that emerge repeatedly throughout the collection. One of the most prominent of these themes is the desire for deliverance from enemies. Here in vv1-3 we hear the Psalmist lifting up his soul to God, imploring God not let his enemies triumph over him, that they be put to shame instead of him. And in many other psalms it is not merely shame that enemies threaten to inflict; it is death itself from which the psalmist needs deliverance. The psalms cry out not just for protection, but for justice for evildoers.

We have many concerns, but we are probably not so preoccupied with our "enemies". Even the worst boss, colleague, or family member rarely threatens the kind of suffering and shame which seems to be a constant danger in the Psalms. Should we learn to express our comparatively minor struggles in the terms the Psalms employ? Or are (most of) our lives blessedly far removed from the kind of danger known thousands of years ago? (And how might this Psalms speak differently to modern people who really have known such danger?).

We should indeed be thankful that here in Luxembourg we enjoy prosperity and comfort that the Psalmist could not possibly have imagined. But this also means that we can easily be easily lulled into a false sense of security, as if there is nothing to worry about - as if we're not going to die.

During Lent we remember that we are mortal, that we are creatures who came from the dust and will return to it. We too are in need of deliverance from the enemy of death, even if it now

typically takes longer to claim us than it once did. But the situation is fundamentally unchanged. And though we should not be overly preoccupied with the reality of our eventual death, it is also healthy to live in the awareness that our days on earth are not forever, that the end will come, that we cannot save ourselves. And living with that awareness can and should, like the Psalmist, cause us to turn to God for our salvation (vv4-5). It is easy for us to live as if we don't need God and never will exactly because our lives seem so far removed from death, from reality. During Lent we deliberately make ourselves a bit uncomfortable exactly so that we can remember or need for God's salvation.

We need to be reminded that we are indeed sinners in need of deliverance. The Good News is that God's mercy never ceases. God chooses "not to remember" our sins; God makes them of no account; God remembers only his steadfast love. God is faithful to forgive the humble and lead them in paths of righteousness.

- 1. Do you ever feel like you are under threat from enemies? Or do you feel like your enemies don't really compare to the enemies threatening the Psalmist?***
- 2. What does it mean to lift up your soul to God?***
- 3. How does our comfort and security insulate us from God? In your experience, do you tend to turn to God more when you feel in danger/threatened? Do the poor tend to be more aware of their need for God?***
- 4. Is it possible that we're too comfortable? If our lives were more precarious would we also be more aware of our need for God?***
- 5. What does it mean for God not to remember our sins?***
- 6. Verse 4 asks God to make known the path we should walk; how does God make this known to us? How do we know we're on the right path? Do we ever tell ourselves we're on the right path only to discover that we were wrong?***
- 7. Does God only lead the humble (v9)? Is humility necessary? Or, put differently, do we have to be humble to acknowledge our need for God?***

## **Week 2 / Psalm 22:23-31**

23 You who fear the Lord, praise him!

All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;  
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!  
24 For he did not despise or abhor  
the affliction of the afflicted;  
he did not hide his face from me,  
but heard when I cried to him.

25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;  
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.  
26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.  
May your hearts live forever!

27 All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the Lord;  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before him.  
28 For dominion belongs to the Lord,  
and he rules over the nations.

29 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
and I shall live for him.  
30 Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord,  
31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
saying that he has done it.

Psalm 22 is strongly associated with Jesus' passion. It begins with the words he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" From this bleak beginning the psalm becomes more hopeful; the initial cry of abandonment ultimately gives way to a statement of trust in God.

If Jesus had never spoken the first words of Psalm 22 from the cross, Christians would still have heard his life echoed in it (and the Gospel writers cite several verses from the psalm in the passion narrative). The portion of the psalm above has turned to praise of the Lord - a Lord who,

"...did not despise or abhor  
the affliction of the afflicted;  
he did not hide his face from me,  
but heard when I cried to him."

We hear here at least a couple of things. Because Jesus has spoken the first words of this psalm from the cross, it's not difficult to imagine him speaking this portion as well. Although Jesus does not continue quoting the psalm out loud, there's good reason to think he has the

rest of it in mind.<sup>2</sup> If so, by invoking this Psalm Jesus is declaring that despite his affliction - and despite the way Jesus might feel in that moment - God has not hidden his face but hears when Jesus cries.<sup>3</sup> Jesus trusts that even though he, like all people, will “go down to the dust” (that is, die), still, “I will live for him”. We hear here a promise of the resurrection to come. This is the thing “a people yet unborn” will say that God “has done”. But as Jesus hangs on the cross, this remains a future hope - a hope he clings to.

But we can also hear these words as being *about* Jesus. He is the one who did not despise our affliction and did not turn his face away; indeed he became human, lived amongst us, and took upon himself our afflictions. This Jesus is the Lord, the one worthy of praise. Dominion belongs to him and “he rules over the nations.”

It is not hard to imagine these words as applying to Jesus:

29 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
and I shall live for him.  
30 Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord,  
31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
saying that he has done it.

In this reading, the thing Jesus “has done” is to remain faithful, even to the point of death. We hear an echo of the cross, as when Jesus declares in John from the cross, “It is finished.” It is Jesus’ faithfulness that ultimately delivers us.

- 1. Does this portion of Psalm 22 sound more like something Jesus would speak (even as he hangs from the cross)? Or does it sound more like something said about Jesus?**
- 2. If we read the words of the psalm in the mouth of Jesus, what do they teach us about him? About his relationship with the Father?**
- 3. If we read the words of the psalm as being about Jesus, what do they tell us about him?**
- 4. Is one of these two readings “better” than the other? Or can they both be good at the same time? What does this psalm teach us about interpreting Scripture?**
- 5. Do you think that the Father hide his face while Jesus is on the cross? Or does God not hide his face? How does our answer affect how we understand God?**

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<sup>2</sup> Many scholars argue that when Jesus quotes part of a psalm he is in effect quoting the entire psalm - especially when it’s the first verse. Because people knew the psalms very well, citing just a fragment of it would lead the hearer to supply the rest. This is something like if someone mentions to you the first line of a familiar song or hymn and immediately the rest comes to mind and you hear the tune.

<sup>3</sup> Despite what we sing in “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us”, there’s good reason for us to believe that God does not “turn his face away” from Jesus but rather does just the opposite.

## Week 3 / Psalm 19

- 1 The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
- 2 Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.
- 3 There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;
- 4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,  
5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,  
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.  
6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens,  
and its circuit to the end of them;  
and nothing is hid from its heat.

- 7 The law of the Lord is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the decrees of the Lord are sure,  
making wise the simple;
- 8 the precepts of the Lord are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is clear,  
enlightening the eyes;
- 9 the fear of the Lord is pure,  
enduring forever;  
the ordinances of the Lord are true  
and righteous altogether.
- 10 More to be desired are they than gold,  
even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey,  
and drippings of the honeycomb.

- 11 Moreover by them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.
- 12 But who can detect their errors?  
Clear me from hidden faults.
- 13 Keep back your servant also from the insolent;  
do not let them have dominion over me.  
Then I shall be blameless,  
and innocent of great transgression.

- 14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable to you,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

This psalm begins with a meditation on creation. Whereas many psalms start with human experience and earthly concerns, this one begins by considering the heavens. The camera

lens, as it were, is not zoomed in, but at as wide an angle as possible. We are invited not to look in, but as far out as we can. There we see the wonderful things that God has made, lightyears in the distance, proclaiming the glory of God. They speak without saying a word, and everyone anywhere can hear it.

In verse 7-10 the Psalm turns to a meditation on the goodness of the law. This might seem an abrupt change of direction, but the idea is that the same God who has created the cosmos and established the laws of physics, etc. has also established laws for his creatures. The creator knows best how the creatures fit within creation! We should desire to know - to really *know* - God's laws, for then we not only live in a way that pleases God, but also in a way that draws us closer to the lawgiver and creator. Protestants especially have been schooled to think of the law as an obstacle to be overcome, but God is the one who gave the law in the first place. It wasn't a mistake.

In verse 12 the psalm turns to the question of keeping the law, asking, "But who can detect their errors? Clear me from my hidden faults". These faults are hidden - not from the view of others - but from the person who commits them; they are even undetectable. Although we typically think of the law as a list of rules a person must obey (and it is indeed that), here the emphasis is more upon the law as an idea, as not just something written on paper but also something written into nature, into the way things are. We look out into the vastness of space and marvel at the immensity, the complexity of it all. We are so small and there's so much we don't know; how can we mere creatures find our place in the world? We are not like the stars and planets set into motion; we have freedom to stray off course, to choose our own way. What an amazing (and terrifying!) reality, that God created the world such that we can violate his law.

How can we ever manage to do the right thing? A good start is to avoid "the insolent" - that is bad, corrupting company. But finally we can only hope that our words and - more difficult - the meditations of our hearts will be acceptable to God, who is both our rock, our anchor, in the universe, but who also redeems us despite our failings.

In the context of Lent, this Psalm reminds us that we are not - despite how we often act - the centre of the universe. In fact, each of us is quite small and, in a sense, inconsequential. Space and time existed long before we did and will likely long after we're gone. We are just here for a moment, for we are mortal - which is exactly why we are in need of redemption.

- 1. *What do you think/feel when you gaze into the heavens?***
- 2. *What do the heavens declare the Glory of God? How do they speak? What do they say? (Might we look upon them but draw the wrong conclusions?)***
- 3. *Do you experience the things this psalm describes (revival, rejoicing, enlightenment, etc.) when you consider God's law? Or do you experience something different?***
- 4. *What does the law teach us about God?***
- 5. *Verse 12 suggests that some faults and errors we commit unknowingly. Are there parts of God's "law" that hard to know? Do we ever know completely what we should and shouldn't do?***
- 6. *What are we asking when we say, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."? Is it a request for God to help us say and think what is good? Or are we asking God to accept our words and thoughts despite their inadequacy.***

## **Week 4 / Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**

- 1 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
for his steadfast love endures forever.
- 2 Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,  
those he redeemed from trouble
- 3 and gathered in from the lands,  
from the east and from the west,  
from the north and from the south.
- 17 Some were sick through their sinful ways,  
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;
- 18 they loathed any kind of food,  
and they drew near to the gates of death.
- 19 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he saved them from their distress;
- 20 he sent out his word and healed them,  
and delivered them from destruction.
- 21 Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,  
for his wonderful works to humankind.
- 22 And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,  
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

Many of the Psalms - even when expressing doubt and despair - still affirm God's everlasting goodness. It's when God's goodness is least apparent (at least to human eyes) that we especially need to fall back upon the promise that God is Good. The Psalms remind us that no matter what is wrong with the situation, God will eventually find a way to make it right. This is the very nature of God; and we know God's character because of the things he has already done. As God has done in the past, so will God in the future.

This Psalm begins with a call to give thanks for God's goodness, for his everlasting love - a goodness and love made known in the past by redeeming His people from trouble. God is a God who redeems, even when redemption seems impossible. And while many Psalms focus upon the need for deliverance from outward enemies, Psalm 107 focuses upon the need for deliverance from the inescapable enemy within: our own sinfulness.

Verse 17 draws a connection between sin and sickness; because of sin, some became sick, near to the point on death. Sickness was the consequence of sin, not so much because God was punishing disobedience, but as a simple matter of cause and effect in the world God created. (The Law God gave the Israelites was largely concerned with cleanliness, in no small part to keep the people healthy). When we stray from God's ways it does not go well for us, in mind, spirit, soul - and body. Disobedience is its own punishment; sin leads to death. Once

sick, the people called out to God and he saved them. It only took a word from God for them to be healed.<sup>4</sup>

During Lent especially, it's important to us face the fact that we are sinful people, that there are countless ways in which we are disobedient. And we suffer because of sin, both our own sins and the sins of others against us. We carry a sickness that leads to death, and we need to be healed. We cannot save ourselves, but the Lord has heard our cries and has saved us from our distress.

Paul has recently preached on two parables of Jesus (Matt 18:21-35; Luke 7:36-50) which both emphasize that when we receive and experience forgiveness it should lead to thankfulness and joy; because we have received grace we can show grace to others. The more we are aware of the forgiveness we've received, the more we rejoice in the freedom God has granted us. But to experience forgiveness we must first confess that we need forgiveness - not just in general but also for specific sins we've committed. This Psalm reminds us that when we cry out to God he hears us and, through Christ, heals us. And that is worth singing about.

- 1. Why do we say that God is good? How do we know that God is good?*
- 2. What is the connection between sin and sickness/suffering? Does sin always lead to suffering? Do we suffer more from our own sins or from the sins of others?*
- 3. Is it difficult to think of yourself as a sinner? Is it hard to confess your sins to God, yourself, to others?*
- 4. Is there a time you suffered for your sin? And then experienced God's healing/deliverance? Or do you feel like you've cried out and God hasn't heard?*
- 5. What is the relationship between our experience of forgiveness and our thankfulness to God? Can we understand God's steadfast love - and can we love God - if we don't understand/receive God's forgiveness?*
- 6. Do we love more if we've been forgiven more? Have some people truly been forgiven more? - or are some people simply more aware of their sin and the forgiveness they've received?*

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<sup>4</sup> The story of the faithful centurion echoes verses 19-20: Matthew 8:5-8 - "When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress." And he said to him, "I will come and cure him." The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but **only speak the word, and my servant will be healed.**"

## Week 5 / Psalm 51:1-12

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.
- 4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgment.
- 5 Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- 6 You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.
- 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

This Psalm is, for good reason, one to the most famous of all the Psalms. One of its many striking features is its honesty and vulnerability, the way it puts away all defenses, all pretense of righteousness, all attempt to save face, and stands naked before God. It does not begin with a request from God or even a praise of God. There is instead an urgency, an immediacy to the plea for mercy, as if this is currently (and possibly always) the most pressing concern.

Traditionally this Psalm is attributed to David and is understood to reflect his experience after having been confronted by Nathan about his affair with Bathsheba and his arranging the death of her husband, Uriah. Whether or not this is in fact true (and there's little reason to think it isn't) that context helps illuminate the Psalm. It's remarkable that David, the one described as "a man after God's own heart" could do such a thing. It wasn't a mistake; he did it quite deliberately and knowingly, and for a long time he tried to hide it. But once Nathan brought it into the open, there was no more hiding, and all the suppressed guilt and shame came pouring out. With a parable Nathan had tricked David into pronouncing judgment upon himself: "As the Lord lives, the man

who has done this deserves to die!" - and when the truth is revealed David knows that this judgment applies to him (see 2 Samuel 12:1-15).

In moments like this there are no excuses, no sense pretending, no way to evade the harsh reality. And there's nowhere to go, no place to turn, no recourse other than to throw yourself upon God's mercy. The consequences cannot be undone and David cannot make amends; he can only ask God to cleanse him of the sin of he feels so palpably. And he doesn't ask only to be relieved of that burden, to have his sentence overturned from guilty to innocent. David realizes he doesn't only need his legal status changed - he needs a new heart, a new spirit.

Even if most of us have never done anything that made us feel the crushing burden of our sin the way David did, Christians have long heard in this Psalm a model for confession before God. Although our sins are different, the need for forgiveness, the need for a new heart, is universal.

I remember a professor of mine declaring that, "Guilt is not a virtue." Sometimes Christians (and others) treat guilt as if it were virtuous. They tell themselves they're good people because they feel bad about something that they ought to feel bad about. Or we might also wallow in our guilt, overemphasizing our own wretchedness to the point that we don't even think God could love us. Guilt is never the goal. The goal, as always, is to turn to God. When we realize - like David did - that we are guilty we can ask God to forgive us and give us a clean heart, and we rest upon the promise that God is ready and willing to hear your prayer. Guilt is never a place to stay; it is something to leave behind.

- 1. Why does the Bible consistently use images of cleansing and washing when it comes to dealing with sin? Does sin make us "dirty"? What does it mean to be cleaned/washed? Do we stay that way?**
- 2. Have you ever, like David, known you were doing something wrong but rationalized it, hid it from view? Or have you ever had the experience of realizing that something you'd done (or been doing) was hurtful? How do we become aware of our sin? How do we learn to see it rather than suppress it?**
- 3. Have you ever held on to your guilt? Has it ever been difficult for you to receive forgiveness? Did you still feel "unclean" for a long time? Are there times that we find it easier to be guilty than forgiven?**
- 4. Has the weight of sin ever made it felt like your bones were being crushed? (v8). What does it feel like to be forgiven? How do we experience "the joy of your salvation"? Why does it need restoring? Does it come and go?**
- 5. Why do people find it so hard to confess? How does this Psalm help us? How is it that vulnerability actually leads to security?**

## Week 6 / Psalm 31:9-16

9 Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;  
my eye wastes away from grief,  
my soul and body also.

10 For my life is spent with sorrow,  
and my years with sighing;  
my strength fails because of my misery,  
and my bones waste away.

11 I am the scorn of all my adversaries,  
a horror to my neighbors,  
an object of dread to my acquaintances;  
those who see me in the street flee from me.

12 I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;  
I have become like a broken vessel.

13 For I hear the whispering of many—  
terror all around!—  
as they scheme together against me,  
as they plot to take my life.

14 But I trust in you, O Lord;  
I say, "You are my God."

15 My times are in your hand;  
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

16 Let your face shine upon your servant;  
save me in your steadfast love.

Earlier we looked at portion of Psalm 22, a psalm which is echoed throughout the Gospel accounts and the verse of which Jesus declares from the cross in Matthew and Mark: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me." And we observed how it is easy - and appropriate - to read that entire Psalm as if spoken by Jesus on the cross. Here in Psalm 31 we find something similar. In Luke's Gospel (23:46) Jesus' final words before breathing his last is a quotation of Psalm 31:5: "Into your hand I commit my spirit." Here too it is right and good to imagine this Psalm both as giving expression to Jesus' suffering as well as his steadfast trust in God.

Hearing/reading this Psalm as the words of Jesus helps bring into focus the fullness of his humanity and the depth of his suffering. We might imagine that, because Jesus knew how the story ended, it would then be relatively easy to drink the cup placed before him. But it could not possible have been easy, and indeed Jesus wished that it would pass from him, that God could make some other way. Being the Messiah was no easy thing, and it's not hard to envision Jesus being quite lonely precisely because he was aware in ways no one else was. He foresaw the tragedy of it all. He carried the sin of the world, not just upon the cross, but throughout his ministry. Verses 9-10 sound like something Jesus might've prayed to the Father. He may very well have.

One of the lessons the Psalms teach us is that expressions of despair are not just acceptable but are, in fact, good and perhaps even necessary. What we might be fearful to say out loud the Psalms teach us to speak. And the truth is that there are moments when, if we are honest, we

do indeed feel hopeless and defeated. Mature faith doesn't suppress this feeling but declares it in the presence of God. If Jesus could express these things, then surely we can too. And the Psalm also teaches us to move from the naming of our despair to trust in God. It is perhaps exactly when we feel most needy that we most fully realize that we have no other hope; where else can we go? And it may be even be that naming that despair is exactly what leads to faith. We speak it out loud and the world doesn't end; instead we might even feel comforted, we might even feel God's face shining upon us.

Jesus carried his cross in the confidence that God would "deliver" and "save" him, that even death would not have the final word but that his suffering would be redeemed, his life would be vindicated, that there would be resurrection. This Lent it should be our prayer that we too would learn, not so much to avoid suffering, but to acknowledge the reality of the human condition, with all its grief and disappointment, and to turn to God. And we too can take up our cross and follow Jesus confident that, though we suffer - even suffer unto death - that, through Christ, we too are delivered and saved, we too share in the promise of resurrection.

- 1. Does this Psalm sound like words Jesus would've spoken/prayed? What aspects of this Psalm connect with aspects of Jesus' life? Or, put differently, where do we hear this Psalm echoed in the Gospels?**
- 2. Is it difficult to imagine words like "distress", "sorrow", and "misery" applying to Jesus? How might his experience of these things be different from us? And how might it be similar?**
- 3. It is hard for you to express your own distress, sorrow, and misery to yourself? To others? To God? Do such expressions seem to evidence more the presence or the lack of faith? Do the faithful despair? And put the other way around, are those who never seem to acknowledge distress, sorrow, and misery evidencing great faith? Or might they evidence a lack of faith?**
- 4. Are there times when you've expressed something to God that you were afraid to acknowledge? What did that feel like? Did harm or help your faith?**
- 5. What is the relationship in this Psalm between suffering and faith? What is the relationship between suffering and faith in Jesus' life? And in our lives? Is suffering something to be avoided? Or to embrace?**

## **Week 7 / Psalm 118:14-24**

14 The Lord is my strength and my might;  
he has become my salvation.

15 There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:

"The right hand of the Lord does valiantly;

16 the right hand of the Lord is exalted;  
the right hand of the Lord does valiantly."

17 I shall not die, but I shall live,  
and recount the deeds of the Lord.

18 The Lord has punished me severely,

but he did not give me over to death.

19 Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the Lord.

20 This is the gate of the Lord;  
the righteous shall enter through it.

21 I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.

22 The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.

23 This is the Lord's doing;  
it is marvelous in our eyes.

24 This is the day that the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." Early Christians heard in this verse of vivid description of the reversal God had enacted in Jesus, and it is among the most referenced in the NT (quoted in Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; alluded to in Eph 2:20; 1 Peter 2:6). The one who was humiliated by his own people was then exalted by God; death leads to resurrection.

This Psalm received fresh meaning for Christians after Jesus rose from the dead. It frequently uses first-person pronouns (I, me, my, our) - but to whom do these refer? Of course, originally it would've been the first speaker of the Psalm, but anyone who speaks this Psalm becomes the "I" about whom it refers. When we sing a song or a psalm we are putting words in our mouths and making them our own - and in the process we are transformed.

In light of Christ's resurrection we can declare that the Lord has become our salvation (v14). We see the Lord's strength and power in defeating death, and indeed - though we die - we shall, in fact, *not* die, but live (v17). Through Jesus, God has made a way, he has opened the gates to life, and he invites us to enter. God heard our cries, beheld us in our weakness, answered, and became our salvation (21). And God did this by overturning all expectations, by doing something previously unimaginable. The Lord's salvation is indeed marvelous, but it is especially marvelous for also being so surprising. We rejoice more when we don't see the good news coming.

As much as this Psalm gives expression to the new life we experience as Christians, perhaps we should again first hear the Psalm as voicing Jesus' own joy after the resurrection. Imagine Jesus going to the cross, wishing the cup would pass from him, but remaining resolutely faithful even as he suffered death. Even though he totally trusted that God raise him from the dead, it surely felt marvelous to emerge from his tomb. On Friday he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and on Easter he might well have said, "I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation." Imagine Jesus walking out of the grave and declaring, "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

The Psalms are often called “Jesus’ prayerbook” - and for good reason. When we make them our prayerbook we learn to pray as Jesus did. And even more, we meet Jesus himself in the Psalms. We become one with him.

- 1. As we’ve asked of other Psalms, when you read this one, do you hear it more as the words of Jesus? As or as something you or another might say? Or as perhaps something you’d like to be able to say? Or is it all these things at once? Or do you hear something else?***
- 2. What do you imagine that Jesus must’ve felt when he emerged from the grave? Did he experience it as simply the expected outcome? Or did even he marvel at what God had done?***
- 3. Why is rejection and the threat of death so central to this Psalm? And so central to Jesus’ story? Is it because they are part of God plan? Or are they contrary to God’s plans, something he overcomes and redeems?***
- 4. Do you marvel at what God has done? Or does it seem like old news? Was there a time when God’s salvation caused you to rejoice more than it does now? Is “the Lord’s doing” still surprising? Does God’s salvation still defy our expectations?***
- 5. How can we live even day in light of the resurrection? - as if indeed every day is cause for rejoicing because it is a day the Lord has made?***