

THE FINISHER

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Entering a race is not as important as how you run that race. And in a race, running it is not as important as winning it. So, it's not so much how you begin (or *that* you begin) as how you finish.

Paul coached, "Run to win!" No doubt that is why he recorded at the end of his days, "I have finished the race. I have kept the faith." He looked forward to receiving his winner's crown.

How are you running this Christian race? Today, let's receive some encouragement for the journey from David, Israel's most famous songwriter.

Psalm 22 (God's Word Translation)

For the choir director ("Chief Musician"):

A psalm of David, to be sung to the tune "Doe of the Dawn." (Ayalet Hashachar)

¹ My God, my God,
why have you abandoned me?
Why are you so far away from helping me,
so far away from the words of my groaning?

² My God,
I cry out by day, but you do not answer—
also at night, but I find no rest.

³ Yet, you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

⁴ Our ancestors trusted you.

They trusted, and you rescued them.

⁵ They cried to you and were saved.

They trusted you and were never disappointed.

⁶ Yet, I am a worm and not a man.

I am scorned by humanity and despised by people.

⁷ All who see me make fun of me.

Insults pour from their mouths.

They shake their heads and say,

⁸ "Put yourself in the Lord's hands.

Let the Lord save him!

Let God rescue him since he is pleased with him!"

⁹ Indeed, you are the one who brought me out of the womb,

the one who made me feel safe at my mother's breasts.

¹⁰ I was placed in your care from birth.

From my mother's womb you have been my God.

¹¹ Do not be so far away from me.

Trouble is near, and there is no one to help.

¹² Many bulls have surrounded me.

Strong bulls from Bashan have encircled me.

¹³ They have opened their mouths to attack me

like ferocious, roaring lions.

¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart is like wax.
It has melted within me.

¹⁵ My strength is dried up like pieces of broken pottery.
My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.
You lay me down in the dust of death.

¹⁶ Dogs have surrounded me.
A mob has encircled me.
They have pierced my hands and feet.

¹⁷ I can count all my bones.
People stare.
They gloat over me.

¹⁸ They divide my clothes among themselves.
They throw dice for my clothing.

¹⁹ Do not be so far away, O Lord.
Come quickly to help me, O my strength.

²⁰ Rescue my soul from the sword,
my life from vicious dogs.

²¹ Save me from the mouth of the lion
and from the horns of wild oxen.

You have answered me.

²² I will tell my people about your name.
I will praise you within the congregation.

²³ All who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, glorify him!
Stand in awe of him, all you descendants of Israel.

²⁴ The Lord has not despised or been disgusted
with the plight of the oppressed one.
He has not hidden his face from that person.
The Lord heard when that oppressed person
cried out to him for help.

²⁵ My praise comes from you while I am among those assembled for worship.
I will fulfill my vows in the presence of those who fear the Lord.

²⁶ Oppressed people will eat until they are full.
Those who look to the Lord will praise him.
May you live forever.

²⁷ All the ends of the earth will remember and return to the Lord.
All the families from all the nations will worship you

²⁸ because the kingdom belongs to the Lord
and he rules the nations.

²⁹ All prosperous people on earth will eat and worship.
All those who go down to the dust will kneel in front of him,
even those who are barely alive.

³⁰ There will be descendants who serve him,
a generation that will be told about the Lord.

³¹ They will tell people yet to be born about his righteousness—
that he has finished it.

At first glance, this is the lament of a man in the “agonies of faith.” He finally receives an answer. Then he praises God and waxes prophetic.

But a closer look, if you have read the New Testament, particularly the Gospel of Matthew, reveals that this is clearly a Messianic psalm—a prophetic preview of the Messiah who was to come. Messiah means “anointed one” (Greek: *Christos* or Christ). While many people today think of anointing as a feeling of confidence or persuasiveness, its meaning in the Scriptures is neither; it means chosen and set apart with authority to perform a God-given function. The term came from the practice of pouring or rubbing with ointment the head of one appointed by God—whether king, or priest, or prophet.

Today, when we anoint with oil as we pray for the sick, our action represents our request that the Holy Spirit, God’s anointing, will come upon that person to do the work for which we pray.

Psalms 22 is one of several psalms that offers clear references to the character and experience of the Messiah (the Anointed Redeemer) who was to come and rescue the Hebrew people.

In this particular psalm there are multiple references to the agony of Christ’s crucifixion. For instance:

¹ *My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?* (Compare with Matthew 27:46)

⁷ *All who see me make fun of me. Insults pour from their mouths. (Compare with Matthew 27:39) They shake their heads and say, ⁸ “Put yourself in the Lord’s hands. Let the Lord save him! Let God rescue him since he is pleased with him!”* (Compare with Matthew 27:43)

¹⁴ *I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint.* (Not a direct reference, but a clear depiction of the effects of crucifixion, which had not yet even been devised.)

¹⁵ *My strength is dried up like pieces of broken pottery. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.* (Compare with John 19:28)

¹⁶ *Dogs have surrounded me. A mob has encircled me. They have pierced my hands and feet.* (Compare with Matthew 27:35)

¹⁷ *I can count all my bones. People stare. They gloat over me.* (Compare with Luke 23:35)

¹⁸ *They divide my clothes among themselves. They throw dice for my clothing.* (Compare with John 19:24)

This psalm is also connected to the New Testament in other ways.

²² *I will tell my people about your name. I will praise you within the congregation.* (Compare with Hebrews 2:11-12)

²⁴ *The Lord has not despised or been disgusted with the plight of the oppressed one. He has not hidden his face from that person. The Lord heard when that oppressed person cried out to him for help.* (Compare with Hebrews 5:7)

²⁸ *because the kingdom belongs to the Lord and he rules the nations.* (Compare with Matthew 6:13)

Where Is God?

This psalm clearly divides into two parts. The first part (1-21a) deals with the writer's agonizing search through periods of asking-and-waiting, "Where is God?!"

He expresses the feelings of one who seeks God's help but finds none. One who questions God's plan but receives no answer. He is in deep trouble. He is in real danger. He is challenged on multiple fronts at the same time. He can't take much more. He is becoming desperate.

Some commentators on the spiritual life and pursuit of God advance the value of desperation for making a solid prayer-connection with God and receiving miracles. But you cannot just manufacture desperation, and simply putting it on will not impress God. Apart from the very kinds of circumstances the psalmist mentioned (undesirable as they are), I know of no other way to achieve genuine desperation. Of course, no one would choose that path if there were options, but it's encouraging to know that God can use even such extremities to work out His good plan.

God's Answer

The two parts of this psalm are divided by a single sentence (21b): "*You have answered me.*" That is the hinge-point of life—God's response! From that moment, everything changes in wonderful ways.

The psalmist does not describe God's answer. Perhaps it was indescribable—brief as a gust of wind, soft as a gentle breeze. Most often, His answer does not come with the roar of thunder or the shaking of an earthquake or the heat of a fire. Usually, it is that "still, small voice" heard within our hearts—so still it is easily missed if we have stopped listening, so small it is easily lost if we do not fix our faith on it when it comes.

Notably, God's answers do not require many words. He created the vast universe with just a few utterances. When all was utter darkness, He said only, "Light, be!" and in a flash all was illuminated. He can bring light to your darkness with just as little effort on His part, and just as suddenly. Will you be listening? I have discovered that one cannot listen and complain at the same time.

My Response

The second part of this psalm (22-31) describes the psalmist's response to God's answer: "I will praise Him."

In an instant, his troubles are forgotten. His praise becomes glorious. And, wonder of wonders, the impact of God's answer to his prayers extends to global transformation! Even to successive generations!

Perhaps you have heard of the "butterfly effect." It is the example put forward by chaos theorists, who discuss the world's sensitive dependence on initial conditions, that a hurricane's formation may depend on whether a butterfly flapped its wings several weeks earlier. It is an advance of what we commonly refer to as the "ripple effect."

Could it be that your prayers for deliverance—yours or others'—are the wings that stir the Heavenly Wind to develop not only your own rescue, but other positive results as well?

My Comfort

One other powerful moment is almost glossed over in verse 25: "*My praise comes from you.*"

It is human nature to crave recognition and appreciation. Some of the Pharisees turned it into a religious art form, standing up in public as they loudly voiced their routine prayers. Jesus rightly denounced such pretense, but the desire is normal, and must be properly directed if we are to avoid similar frustration and condemnation.

In fact, the praise of men never satisfies. No matter how much you receive, it will never be enough.

The approval that does satisfy is that which comes from our Creator. When He says, "Good," or "Very good," our longing rests.

The psalmist found God's approval coming directly to him as he gathered with God's people in worship. In the midst of the activity of praise, he felt the warmth of God's presence, God's hand upon his shoulder, God's love flooding his heart. All the approval you need can be found in the same way—in the same situation, in the same activity. Your longing, too, will find its rest, in the presence of your worshiping friends. Look for it the next time we gather.

The Capstone

The capstone of this psalm is its ending:

*³⁰ There will be descendants who serve him, a generation that will be told about the Lord. ³¹ They will tell people yet to be born **about his righteousness—that he has finished it.***

This is the Good News, the story that we have to tell everyone: God has finished His work in righteousness. It is done! Redemption has been accomplished. Forgiveness has been granted. Everlasting life has been restored.

God has done this because He Himself is righteous. "*He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone*" (1 Peter 2:22).

God has done this in a manner consistent with His righteousness. "*He is just and justifies everyone who has faith in Jesus*" (Romans 3:26), and "*He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9).

What's more, God has imputed His righteousness to those (us) who trust in Jesus. "*God made Him who knew no sin to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God through Him*" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

He has done it! For you, for me, and for all who put their trust in Christ Jesus, His Son. With His final breath He declared, "*It is finished*" (John 19:30).

I will conclude with this admonition from Hebrews 12 (NKJV):

*¹ Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking unto Jesus, **the author and finisher** of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

He has finished it.