

Interpreting Psalm 22: Collective Suffering and National Hope in the Indonesian Context

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Abstract

This article explores the significance of Psalm 22, particularly the poignant cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and its theological implications, both within the context of the psalm itself and its fulfillment in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. By employing a theological-exegetical method, the study analyzes the psalm's literary structure and theological themes, particularly the expression of divine abandonment. The article then connects these themes to the Passion narratives in the New Testament, highlighting how Jesus' cry from the cross directly references and fulfills the prophetic words of Psalm 22. Furthermore, the paper incorporates insights from key theologians such as Bonhoeffer and Moltmann to explore the doctrine of a suffering God, emphasizing divine empathy in human suffering. The study extends to interfaith dialogue in Indonesia, examining how religious communities navigate social differences and contribute to fostering peace and tolerance through dialogue. By combining theological reflection with sociological analysis, the article underscores the importance of interfaith dialogue as a tool for promoting social cohesion and addressing religious intolerance. This paper contributes to both theological scholarship and interfaith studies by offering a comprehensive analysis of the intersection between suffering, redemption, and social harmony in the context of Psalm 22.

Keywords:

my God; forsaken me; Psalm 22; suffering; hope; Indonesian context

INTRODUCTION

A common theme in contemporary theological reflection is the claim that God suffers in solidarity with all who suffer—wherever suffering occurs, God is present. In Christian theology, this idea is most fully realized in the person of Jesus Christ, who, through his Incarnation, remains both fully divine and fully human. As described in the Augustinian doctrine, Jesus is not merely God or man but the same God who became man. He did not lose his divinity but embraced human experiences—growing, hungering, thirsting, enduring physical pain, and ultimately dying on the cross. This

paradox of divine suffering lies at the heart of Christian faith: God's love is shown through Jesus' suffering, which leads to salvation (Michael, 2019, p. 97-140).

Psalm 22, a psalm of lament, expresses deep anguish and distress, beginning with the cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This desperate plea of abandonment reflects the psalmist's suffering, which includes physical torment, emotional anguish, and the ridicule of enemies. Yet, amidst this pain, the psalmist also expresses trust in God's faithfulness, recognizing God's past acts of deliverance and confidently anticipating future salvation. This tension between despair and trust is characteristic of the psalms of lament.

Psalm 22 has often been linked to the suffering of Jesus Christ. Though the psalmist may not have known it, his words prophetically reflect the suffering of the just man, whose pain serves to establish God's Kingdom. The connection between this psalm and the Passion of Christ is not surprising, as Jesus' own suffering on the cross echoes the psalm's cry. Even without the direct quotation by Jesus, the evangelists' use of the psalm in the Passion narrative highlights its significance.

In the context of Christianity, we must remember that Jesus' death on the cross was not only an expression of human agony but also a sacrificial act of love that redeemed the world. As Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, Christianity is unique in confessing a God who suffers. As we reflect on the suffering of Jesus, we are reminded of the profound depths of God's love for humanity and the transformative power of the cross. (Taylor, 1998, p. 119.).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study reveals the profound theological themes of divine abandonment expressed in Psalm 22, especially in the context of Jesus' crucifixion. A close reading of the psalm's literary structure uncovers its deep emotional resonance, particularly the cry of abandonment, which captures the psalmist's anguish (VanGemeren, 1988, p. 201). This emotional distress is mirrored in the Passion narratives in the New Testament, where Jesus' cry on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34), explicitly references Psalm 22, fulfilling its prophetic significance (Hassler, 2022, p. 10). The exploration of this connection demonstrates that Jesus' lament is not merely a personal expression of pain, but a prophetic fulfillment that underscores both anguish and messianic hope. The insights from theologians such as

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jürgen Moltmann, who discuss the doctrine of a suffering God, provide a theological framework to understand how divine empathy in human suffering is central to the Christian faith (Moltmann, 1980, p. 115; Bonhoeffer, 1959, p. 361). This reflection reveals that Jesus' cry embodies both the human experience of abandonment and the hope of redemption, signaling a profound connection between the suffering of Christ and the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan for humanity (Quinn, 2023, p. 20).

This study highlights the crucial role of interfaith dialogue in fostering social harmony and understanding within Indonesia's diverse religious landscape. The findings reveal that religious communities engage with one another amidst social differences through a variety of interfaith initiatives, promoting peace and tolerance across traditions (Manuain et al., 2024, p. 2). Historical and contemporary examples of successful interfaith collaborations between religious leaders and civil society organizations were examined, showing how these efforts have contributed to reducing religious intolerance and extremism (Robita & Anwar, 2025, p. 63). Moreover, the research underscores the significant impact of Indonesia's national ideology, Pancasila, in shaping the state's approach to religious coexistence, reinforcing the values of unity and mutual respect in a pluralistic society (Lu, 2022, p. 12). By integrating sociological and theological analyses, the study affirms the importance of interfaith dialogue as a powerful tool for addressing social divides and promoting inclusivity, ultimately encouraging a more peaceful and harmonious society (Hutabarat, 2023, p. 7).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The view that God feels pain appears to be incompatible with the medieval and patristic view of God as 'impassible. Impassibility (*apatheia*) is the doctrine that God cannot suffer or change and it is a doctrine that the early church and the medieval church had in common with some Greek philosophers, most notably Aristotle whose Unmover Mover was needed to explain the changing universe while remaining unchanged in any way himself. Aristotle thought that a perfect being cannot be dependent on anything else for its perfection nor can it have any potential to change from one imperfect state to a better one or a better one to a worse one, such as the state of fluctuating emotions. This is also connected with other attributes of a perfect being such as being incorporeal (without a body), timeless, and spaceless (Darley, 2021). In his book *Metaphysics*, he writes:

“it is clear then from what has been said that there is a substance which is eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things. It has been shown that this substance cannot have any magnitude, but is without parts and indivisible...But it has also been shown that it is impassible and unalterable; for all the other changes are posterior to change of place. (Aristotle, 1984, 603-604).

In this context, the Biblical language of God showing emotion or change could be accommodated to Greek thinking in terms of anthropomorphism. According to an old Talmudic saying, ‘The Torah speaks according to the language of men.’ Moses Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed* explains that this means that ‘expressions, which can easily be comprehended and understood by all, are applied to the Creator.’ As a result, there has been a tradition within Judaism not to take those passages literally which are thought to be ‘unfitting’ for the divine e.g. in the Psalms where God is said to get drunk and have a hangover or to literally walk about in the garden of Eden. Similarly, it was argued, that God does not get angry nor change his mind, since ‘he is not man that he should change his mind’ (Numbers 23:19). By extension it was reasoned that God does not feel pain, nor suffer since this too would entail change and ‘I am the Lord I change not’ (Malachi 3:6) (Darley, 2021).

Lutheran theologian Kitamori reflects, ‘We are living in an age of God and pain. The world today seems to be stretched out under pain.’ ‘Only a suffering God can help us,’ (Bonhoeffer, 1959, 361) wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer from a Nazi prison where he was later hanged. This theme of a ‘suffering God’ has been notably developed by another Lutheran theologian Jurgen Moltmann in a series of books beginning with *The Crucified God*, in 1971. Turning his fire on Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover, Moltmann writes: “A God who is eternally only in love with himself, and therefore without concern for others, is a monster, an idol...God himself has gone through the experiences of Christ’s cross” (Moltmann, 1980).

The last words uttered by Jesus in Matthew’s gospel are a prayer. He could have used any form of expression. He could have expressed rage, given the cruel nature of the means of execution, but instead, he prays. Actually what he does is scream a prayer. And what a prayer it is! He abandons his usual means of address, which is the intimate “Abba,” “Father”. Now, he no longer presumes intimacy. He uses “a form of address that is common to all people: “My God!” He is identified with human beings. Then, he continues by quoting the opening lines of Psalm 22: For what reason have you abandoned me? Why have you abandoned me? Notice that Jesus does not question the existence of God;

neither does he question the power of God. He is questioning the silence of God (Brown, 1994, p. 1046).

The Roman centurion, who had no idea what was going on and had never read Psalm 22, got it the day Jesus was crucified: Truly, this man was God’s son. He died so that we might no longer live for ourselves but live for him and through him, be whole. For one terrible, dark afternoon, God and Jesus, out of their choosing, were separated. Jesus descended into the hell of an absence of God. He did it for us; he and the Father did it for everyone who has been laid low by life. I may not know whether or not God answers your prayers in a specific sense, but I do know, in the larger sense, the big answer has already been given. In the silence of a Friday afternoon, 2000 years ago, after the ridicule, after jeering, came a helpless cry of utter abandonment. After the cry, came the death. After the death, came God’s big answer, not in words, but in the form of a life laid down, a body raised, a stone rolled away, and a world that will never be the same again (Adams, 2008).

Psalm 22

Psalm 22 never originally described the psalmist’s situation; instead, the psalm represents the Messiah’s words on the cross. The first-person pronouns (I, me, my, and our) refer exclusively to Jesus Christ. The psalmist and prophet David wrote Jesus’s words centuries in advance. This view presupposes a core tenet of Judaism, Christianity, and even Islam—namely, that the Bible contains predictions. Psalm 22 includes statements that do not easily fit the life of David. For example, we have no historical evidence that David’s adversaries cast lots for his garments and pierced, pinned, or tore his hands and feet (vv. 16, 18). The book of Esther tells the Purim story without mentioning God, whereas Psalm 22 appeals to God excessively. Moreover, the sufferer of Psalm 22 comes across as a pious saint, but Esther appears ungodly and immoral. For reasons such as these, Bible readers often bypass the Esther option (Hassler, 2022).

The Gospels use Psalm 22 to describe Jesus’s suffering on the cross. Jesus spoke the opening words of the psalm on the tree: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1; Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). Quoting Psalm 22:18, John explains that the Roman soldiers divided Jesus’s garments by casting lots “to fulfill the Scripture.” Sinners blasphemed Jesus (βλασφημέω), wagged their heads, and chided him to trust God and be delivered. In Matthew 27:43, Jesus’s detractors knew that he claimed to be the

Messiah so they mockingly quoted Psalm 22:8 at him because in early Jewish tradition, the psalm described the suffering Messiah. The famous line “they pierced my hands and my feet” invokes crucifixion (Ps 22:16; cf. Mark 15:25; John 20:25). The last word of Psalm 22 (כָּל־עֲשֵׂי, “it is finished,” v. 31) corresponds with one of Jesus’s last words before his death (τετέλεσται, “it is finished,” John 19:30) (Berkovitz, 2019, p. 223, 239).

Psalm 22 records the Messiah’s own words—words spoken on the cross at approximately three o’clock, moments before he took his final breath and departed for paradise. The psalm constituted a loud prayer offered to the Father and other words spoken to witnesses. The sufferer of Psalm 22 was Jesus Christ and no other. King David the prophet wrote Jesus’s words centuries in advance, and these words enrich the biography of Jesus (Edersheim, 1896, 609). VanGemeran (Heinemann, 1990, 285) makes the observation that the psalmist views God in contrastive terms this situation:

his God has ‘forsaken’ him (v. 1a)

Israel is God is ‘enthroned’ (v.3a)

his God is ‘far...from saving’ (v.1b)

Israel’s God is ‘holy’ or the ‘Holy One’ (v. 3b)

his God is unresponsive to his ‘groaning’ (v.1c)

Israel’s God receives the ‘praise of Israel’ (v.3c).

He concludes that this understanding allows the reader to find deep appreciation for Jesus’ cry on the cross, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? It shows the forsakenness and alienation from God the Father and the cutting off from any act of deliverance at the hand of God (VanGemeran, 1988, p. 201). It is clear from these examples that there is an abundance of similarities between the poetic writing of Psalm 22 and the verses found in the New Testament that depict Christ (Speliopoulou, 2010).

Psalm 22 (v. 2-11) introduces the tragic theme of divine abandonment or the farness of God—this is the central problem of the Psalm. But, what exactly is divine abandonment here? Notice how the author describes God’s farness and nearness not in terms of companionship but in terms of action: far-ness רָחֹק and abandonment עָזַב are paired contrastively with action words like salvation יִשָּׁע (v. 2), deliverance פָּלַט, and escape מָלַט (v. 5-6); the psalmist is saying “you’re not acting in the way you have in the past” more than “we’re not as relationally close as we once were.” The state of abandonment is also perceived by onlookers, who see that the psalmist requires rescue נִצָּחַ and deliverance פָּלַט (v. 9), also suggests that this is about God’s action. In other

words, divine distance, in this case, is not about a lack of affection or relational distance so much as it refers to inactivity; the psalmist feels far from God because, for whatever reason, God has not continued the saving, delivering actions the psalmist knows him for. Therefore, this is the answer הַיְּשׁוּעָה the psalmist seeks (v. 3)—rescue from his deathly peril (Quinn, 2023).

Limburg says that this Psalm is a pattern of Jesus' life: "He felt forsaken, lying in the dust of death, but was then rescued"(Limburg, 2000, p. 71). From an Evangelical point of view, this would mean that He felt forsaken as a human emotion He was suffering in His incarnate form. This lends yet more credence to the idea that this Psalm is not just a petition, not just a liturgy, but also a Messianic prophecy. Jesus shows us the reality of the cross, identifies with the afflicted (v. 3-5), reflects the hostility of people towards Himself (v. 6-8), remembers his mother (v. 9-10), laments the rejection by humanity (v. 11-18), prays to God (v. 19-22), and praises God for His eventual response (v. 23-31) (Kraus, 1988, p. 301).

Within the context of the entire psalm, the cry, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" is the anguished introduction to an increasingly intense plot curve that culminates in YHWH's deliverance of the afflicted king from death in a way that affects and invites the participation of all humanity. Jesus's situation of suffering does find resonance with that of Psalm 22, so his cry of dereliction evokes a depth of distress related to imminent death. But Jesus and the gospel authors also know how the psalm ends—with victory and celebration for all the nations because of the rescue of the Davidic king. It seems reasonable that listeners familiar with the psalm would not be expected to disregard its entire second half. If we keep that context in mind, Jesus's words on the cross express not only deep anguish, but also relenting trust in YHWH's faithfulness, and, for those familiar with the scriptures, a proclamation that Jesus is the afflicted king of whom YHWH's rescue will bring about thriving for all. It is a cry of anguish mingled with confidence (Quinn, 2023) .

In this psalm we have the example of the just man who long before the coming of the Messiah was, under God's guidance, sanctifying himself by the imitation of Christ. The divinely inspired hopes of the psalmist can only be adequately satisfied in the person of Christ the Redeemer. We have nothing to lose by refusing to force details of Christ's portrait into the Old Testament. To anticipate the progress of God's revelation is not only an unwarrantable interference in God's plans: it destroys any apologetic

argument, it is nothing more than a *petitio principii*. Christ is the fulfillment of prophecy; prophecy points the way, but of its very nature it does not reveal Christ in all His perfection; we can hardly expect it to defeat its purpose, which is the gradual preparation for the coming of Christ. If we but consider the development of revelation according to the broad outlines that the Old Testament gives us, we shall not need to insert details *ex event*, for we shall realize quite clearly that Christ and His Kingdom are the only adequate and definitive fulfillment of all the hopes and longings of Israel (Worden, 1953).

Perception of Suffering in Indonesian Culture

In Indonesian culture, suffering is often perceived not only as an individual experience but also as a communal burden shared by society. This cultural understanding of suffering emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals within their communities. Whether it's through personal hardships or collective struggles, such as economic crises or natural disasters, Indonesians view suffering as part of a larger social fabric that unites them (Hutabarat, 2023, p. 6). This perspective aligns with the value of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), which encourages people to support one another during difficult times. The idea is that suffering can be mitigated when the community comes together, reflecting a collective responsibility for each other's well-being (Wicaksono, 2020, p. 138).

In Indonesian society, suffering is often seen as a test of faith and strength, something that individuals must endure in order to grow and achieve personal transformation. This aligns with traditional cultural beliefs where overcoming hardship is seen as a form of spiritual and moral growth (Lu, 2022, p. 12). In many cases, people believe that suffering purifies the soul, preparing individuals for greater blessings in the future. Indonesian culture places great emphasis on resilience and endurance, with the understanding that suffering is temporary and can lead to personal and societal development (Manuain et al., 2024, p. 3). For this reason, many Indonesians remain hopeful and persevere through adversity, trusting that their efforts will bring about better circumstances.

The role of suffering in Indonesian culture is also influenced by religious beliefs, particularly those in Islam and Christianity, where the concept of *sabar* (patience) plays a central role (Robita & Anwar, 2025, p. 61). Both religions teach that enduring suffering

with patience can bring spiritual rewards and lead to divine mercy. For instance, in Christianity, the suffering of Christ is seen as a way to redeem humanity, while in Islam, the Prophet Muhammad's trials are viewed as tests of faith (Hutabarat, 2023, p. 7). These religious teachings reinforce the cultural view that suffering is a means of drawing closer to God and strengthening one's relationship with the divine (Jayadi, 2024, p. 16). The dual influence of culture and religion helps shape a unique Indonesian perspective on suffering as a shared experience with spiritual significance.

Suffering is also seen in Indonesian culture as a moment for introspection and connection with others. In times of hardship, people tend to turn to their community for emotional and physical support (Lu, 2022, p. 13). This support system is an integral part of how Indonesians cope with personal suffering. The social support networks in Indonesia, such as extended families, neighborhood associations, and religious groups, offer both practical and emotional assistance. By sharing their pain with others, individuals find comfort, solace, and sometimes even a sense of relief, reaffirming the belief that they are not alone in their struggles (Wicaksono, 2020, p. 140).

Despite the challenges and hardships, Indonesians generally view suffering as an opportunity for personal and communal renewal. The resilience of the people is a testament to their ability to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity. Whether through collective efforts to rebuild after natural disasters or individual perseverance through personal trials, suffering in Indonesia is often reframed as a path to spiritual growth and societal progress (Robita & Anwar, 2025, p. 62). This cultural resilience forms the foundation of the Indonesian worldview, which teaches that suffering is not the end but a part of the continuous journey toward healing and improvement (Lu, 2022, p. 14).

Interfaith Dialogue and Social Differences

In Indonesia, a country with rich religious diversity, interfaith dialogue plays a crucial role in promoting social harmony and understanding. Indonesia is home to a variety of religious communities, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and traditional belief systems, each with its own practices and values (Hutabarat, 2023, p. 6). Given this diversity, religious leaders and communities have recognized the importance of dialogue to bridge differences and build mutual respect. Interfaith dialogue helps foster peace by encouraging the understanding that different religious traditions can coexist peacefully, despite having differing beliefs and practices (Manuain et al., 2024, p.

2). This dialogue is seen as a way to ensure that religious freedom is respected and that social cohesion is maintained in a pluralistic society.

Indonesia's history of religious conflict, particularly between Muslims and Christians in certain regions, has highlighted the need for sustained interfaith efforts (Robita & Anwar, 2025, p. 63; Bahabol, 2019, p. 61). Despite these challenges, the majority of Indonesians value tolerance and mutual respect, which are ingrained in both religious teachings and national ideals. The state ideology of Pancasila emphasizes the importance of belief in one God while promoting unity and harmony among diverse groups (Lu, 2022, p. 12). Religious leaders in Indonesia have often used this national ideology as a basis for encouraging cooperation and understanding across different faiths. Through interfaith dialogue, religious communities work together to promote peace, not only in theological matters but also in addressing social issues such as poverty, education, and human rights (Hutabarat, 2023, p. 7).

Interfaith dialogue in Indonesia is crucial in addressing social differences, particularly in the face of growing religious intolerance and extremism. By providing a platform for open discussion, people from different religious backgrounds can share their perspectives and resolve misunderstandings (Manuain et al., 2024, p. 4; Bahabol, 2019, p. 63). This exchange helps diminish prejudice and misconceptions, paving the way for a more inclusive society. It is through these conversations that communities can develop a deeper understanding of each other's religious practices, ultimately fostering tolerance (Wicaksono, 2020, p. 141). In a country as diverse as Indonesia, interfaith dialogue is seen as essential for promoting a sense of belonging and ensuring that no group feels marginalized or oppressed.

The role of interfaith dialogue extends beyond religious leaders and includes the participation of civil society organizations, educational institutions, and government bodies. Schools and universities in Indonesia have integrated interfaith discussions into their curricula, helping young people develop the skills necessary to engage with people from different religious backgrounds (Jayadi, 2024, p. 30). These educational initiatives aim to promote empathy, respect, and collaboration among future generations. Through these efforts, Indonesia strives to create a culture of peace where religious differences are acknowledged and celebrated rather than feared. The idea is to educate citizens about religious diversity in a way that emphasizes shared human values, such as kindness, justice, and compassion (Bahabol, 2019, p. 64).

While interfaith dialogue has made significant strides in promoting peace, there are still challenges to overcome. Issues such as religious extremism, political exploitation of religious sentiments, and cultural misunderstandings continue to threaten social harmony (Robita & Anwar, 2025, p. 64). Despite these challenges, many Indonesians remain committed to the idea of a pluralistic society where different religions can live side by side. Religious leaders, civil society groups, and ordinary citizens continue to advocate for peace, justice, and mutual respect (Hutabarat, 2023, p. 8). The ongoing dialogue between faith communities is essential in maintaining Indonesia's national unity and ensuring that religious diversity remains a strength rather than a source of division.

CONCLUSION

Jesus' cry of abandonment on the cross is not simply an expression of lost divine relationship, but a profound mixture of excruciating pain and cosmic hope. In the Gospel narratives, the words Jesus speaks may appear to be despairing when isolated, but within the context of Psalm 22, they reveal a cry that is both an anguished lament and a declaration of trust in God's future rescue. This cry encapsulates the tension between suffering and confidence in God's deliverance, a theme also present in Psalm 17, which describes extreme distress but also affirms God's eventual salvation.

The centurion's declaration after Jesus' death, "Truly, this man was God's Son" (Matt 27:54; Mark 15:39), confirms the deep Messianic significance of Jesus' cry. Even in the face of ultimate suffering, Jesus proclaims not only his anguish but also his kingship and the impending arrival of God's kingdom. His cry, though marked by pain and loneliness, also signals the arrival of God's plan for redemption - a plan that will ultimately bring salvation to the nations. In this cry, we see the fullness of Christ's identity. He is both the suffering servant and the triumphant king. While his followers were left in despair, Jesus' words point beyond his death to the victory that will follow: the establishment of God's kingdom and the fulfillment of prophecy. Ultimately, Jesus' cry on the cross serves as both a lament and a proclamation of the hope that will come through his resurrection, the foundation of the new kingdom of God.

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