But on the cross, there is no bitter shout-out against the world coming from the parched and cracked lips of Jesus. It would certainly fit the pattern of most victims of crucifixion, which was a means of death so shameful that proper citizens of the empire refused to even speak of it. Those revolutionary bandits crucified with Jesus no doubt cast their insults not only at him but at their tormentors (Mark 15:32). When the gathered crowd shouted mockingly, “Save yourself and come down from the cross” (Mark 15:30), we can imagine Jesus being tempted to do just that; to strike fear into their hearts of his enemies and to retaliate against them for their mistreatment of him.

Yet, Jesus does not utter a word of blame toward any person, even those who beat and tortured him. The only words Jesus says concerning his tormentors are a prayer of mercy for them: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Jesus does not blame others for his current predicament.

So, does Jesus blames God? Jesus says, “*Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani*?” which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). It sure sounds like Is Jesus blaming God in his last moments? We would certainly understand if he did. As Tilly said, it is natural for us to assign credit or blame to others for our misfortune. Jesus was faithful to his mission, he cultivated a deep intimacy with God, but now at the critical moment it seems that God abandons him. The crowd interpreted his cry as a call to the prophet Elijah who, according to Jewish tradition, would come and help those in deep distress (Mark 15:35). If God had abandoned Jesus, maybe someone else would come to his rescue.

But what the crowd missed, and what many people reading this story miss, is that Jesus’ cry to God, while certainly a lament of despair, transcends the usual human categories of credit and blame. Students of Scripture recognize Jesus’ cry as the first line of Psalm 22, a “plea for deliverance from suffering and hostility” according to the psalm’s superscription. In the tradition of the time, to speak the first line of a psalm was as good as speaking the whole thing; thus, Jesus brings the whole witness of the psalm to his cry from the cross.

From its words, Psalm 22 strikes the reader with the depth of the psalmist’s relationship with God, using the personal possessive pronoun “*My* God.” To the psalmist, God is a father who nurtured and cared for him since his birth (vv. 9-10). This is a remarkably intimate address for God in the Scriptures, but it is that very intimacy which heightens the tension. The depth of the connection makes the absence more deeply felt. Thus, the psalmist’s complaint that God has “forsaken” him takes on a particularly tragic tone. “Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” is a question of desperation and despair coming from one who has known the security and provision of God throughout his life (v. 1). God was always there for his “ancestors,” delivering them when they cried out to God (v. 2). They were not “put to shame” then, but now it seemed that God is abandoning this child to the shaming scorn and mockery of others (vv. 6-7).

It is little wonder, then, that Jesus called these words to mind in his last moments. Looking at the sneering crowd, remembering the betrayal of his friends, feeling the agonizing sting of the lash and the desperate squeezing of the life from his body, Jesus would have no evidence whatsoever that the God manifest with him in his ministry, the God whose power flowed within him, the Father with whom he spent so many hours alone in prayer, was still with him. All the human evil of the world now swirled around him, ready to strike (vv. 12-13, 16). Despite Jesus’ pleas, God seems to be very, very far away (v. 19).

It is important to note, however, that neither Jesus nor the psalmist is ascribing blame to God as the cause of his trouble. Human beings, accustomed to assigning credit and blame, are inclined to construct a framework on which to hang their victimhood. God often becomes the chief cause of pain in the minds of many people, whether through overt action or inexcusable absence. It is hard to find a pastor who has not encountered a suffering person who asks, “Why did God do this to me?” or “Why did God let this happen to me?” This is not the question that the psalmist asks or the one which Jesus cries out. Their question is one of earnest seeking: “Where is God in the midst of my suffering?” Accustomed to God’s faithful presence, they naturally expect God to be there in their hour of distress.

This is where the inseparability of the psalm and the passion of Jesus can teach us something powerful. Jesus has the psalm in mind on the cross and we read the psalm with Jesus on the cross in our minds. The Jesus who hangs on the cross not only cries out to God, but he is God. He is both the one who saves and the one who suffers. In Jesus, God speaks to human suffering not through arguments of God’s goodness overcoming the world’s evil or of divine platitudes about perseverance. Instead, God speaks to human suffering by participating fully within it, feeling the pain, bearing all the blame and shame of humanity in a moment of ultimate anguish. The paradox is that in those times of suffering when God seems inexplicably absent, it is then that God is most intimately near because only God, in the person of Christ, can truly say to us, “I know how you feel. I’ve been where you are.”

The basic thrust of the psalm, as well as of the passion narrative, is the combination of suffering and celebration. Psalm 22 is a prayer of lament, but it is also a hymn of praise. From verse 22 on, the writer looks at his suffering from the other side, from a place of restoration and healing, and sees that God never abandoned him in his suffering. “[God] did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; [God] did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him” (v. 24). Complaint is transformed into confidence, the joyful assurance of God’s steadfast love and enduring presence. When we stop reading the psalm after verse 1, as many people in the crowd that Good Friday did and many do today, we miss the rest of the story, which is the glorious transformation that only God can deliver.

When we read the whole of Psalm 22, we discover that Jesus’ cry is not one of blame but of hope and confidence that the God who stands by us in our suffering is the same God who reigns forever, triumphant over the troubles of this world. The final verses of Psalm 22 paint a picture of the peace and wholeness of the eternal kingdom of God that Jesus preached. Even on the cross, Jesus did not give up that vision; he had confidence that God would set the world to rights and that his suffering would somehow be redemptive. The resurrection made that vision a reality.

Jesus did not play the blame game. He chose instead to praise God amid his suffering, knowing that through his suffering the world would be healed. His invitation to his disciples to pick up their own crosses is an invitation to see our own suffering in this same way. We are called to see our lives, both the tragedies and the triumphs, within the larger context of God’s kingdom. And when we look at the cross, we know precisely where God is amid our suffering. God has not forsaken us; God is there beside us. Which is why, on this Good Friday, we give God all the credit!

Prayer: Jesus Christ, Son of God, you suffered for us, the righteous one for the unrighteous many. Save us by the shame of your Passion and clothe us with the robe of your righteousness. Through the suffering and death you did not deserve, we have escaped the punishment our sins have deserved. Strengthen us to live into this new life you gift to us, as your disciples, on behalf of the world. Amen.

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**Did Jesus Play the Blame Game?**

Good Friday, April 15, 2022 [Psalm 22](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+22&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

What do the Academy Awards, a congressional hearing, and a lovers’ quarrel all have in common? Crying and a lot of gesturing. And, according to the late Charles Tilly, professor of social science at Columbia University, the yin and yang of credit and blame. “We humans spend our lives blaming, taking credit and (often more reluctantly) giving credit to other people,” wrote Tilly in his book *Credit and Blame*. “At all scales, credit and blame pervade social life.” As humans, living within social networks, we insist that whether things go right or wrong that someone caused them and should take responsibility for the consequences, good or bad. We expend a lot of energy assigning that responsibility to ourselves or to others. That is why the Oscars are such a spectacle of gushing speeches, why members of Congress are so dramatic, and why lovers’ arguments bring shouts and tears. We want to ensure we get what we deserve while preventing others from laying the blame at our feet.

When he started the book, Tilly theorized that credit and blame are simply different sides of the same coin, but he discovered that blame “activates sharper distinctions between a worthy us and an unworthy them than credit does, [making] that us-them boundary harder to cross than in the cases of taking or receiving credit.” In other words, while giving or sharing credit draws people together, blame drives a wedge between people and that separation can be devastating.

On Good Friday, blame leads to a cross; yet the one hanging there does not seem to blame anyone for his plight. Or does he? To answer that we need to dig a little deeper into the connection between the narrative of the Passion and the text of Psalm 22 on which the gospel writers anchor some of their imagery. Mark tells us that there was plenty of blame to go around on that Friday. The cross was the intersection and the focal point for the worst kinds of human evil. At the top of the list were the religious authorities who accuse an innocent Jesus of “blasphemy” while heaping blame upon him in a sham trial and a hasty sentence. The Roman Empire, embodied by Pontius Pilate, used violence to both provoke and placate its subjects. Even Jesus’ closest friends make the list: one betrayed him, and the rest abandoned him. Jesus hung naked in disgrace, broken and bleeding from the violence, with no one to comfort him, and dying as a death-row inmate who never committed a crime. If anyone had reason to assign blame to the whole of humanity, it was Jesus.