

## Art & Belief

# The Cross from Christ's Perspective: Psalm 22 and James Tissot

Have you ever wondered what it was like for Jesus on the cross? James Tissot shows the event from Christ's perspective. His toes visible at the bottom border next to Mary Magdalene laying at his feet. He would have seen his mother and the faithful surrounded by the witnesses including soldiers, mockers, the healed, and the hoping. From the cross he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you



James Tissot, *What Our Lord Saw from the Cross*, 1886–94. Opaque watercolor over graphite on grey green wove paper, 248 x 230 mm, Brooklyn Museum. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/objects/13508>

forsaken me?" Alone, this opening line of Psalm 22 sounds like abandonment, but

those who knew the psalm would have heard far more than a single line, the way "I have a dream" points beyond a phrase to Martin Luther King Jr.'s wider vision.

Like Tissot's watercolor, this Davidic psalm gives a glimpse of Jesus's experience. Tissot's well-dressed figures on horseback resemble the psalm's "strong bulls of Bashan [who] open their mouths wide against me" with taunts and public humiliation. The psalm turns visceral: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth." Evildoers "pierce my hands and my feet [and] divide my garments among them, and for my clothing cast lots." In these verses, God feels far away.

And then Psalm 22 turns, reaching beyond the living crowd to the realm of the dead with a promise of resurrection: "All those who go down to the dust will kneel before him." Death itself will not have the last word. The psalm describes those already in the grave gathered in praise and declares: "Posterity will serve him ... declaring to a people yet unborn: **He has done it!**"

That final phrase lands with Easter light. The psalm's opening cry of

abandonment carries through suffering into trust, and finally to a proclamation

that resonates with Christ's final words in John: "**It is finished.**"

What if, in the final minutes of torture and torment, Jesus did not only cry out but was also praying—maybe even *singing*—this psalm to himself? What if his words are for those at his feet—Mary Magdalene, his mother clutching her heart, John, the faithful, the bewildered, even the jeering "holy" men in their finery—reminding them that when God *feels* far away, God has not turned away? Even here, in the darkest moment, God is trustworthy. What changes if we hear Jesus' cry not as abandonment, but as trust and triumph?

-- Gayle L. Goudy, PhD  
gaylegoudy@gmail.com