



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

Volume 8, Issue 4

Web Site: <http://www.minuteswithmessiah.com>

February 2007

ME DEO ES SU DEO

“How Great is **Our** God.” “**Our** God, He is Alive.” Songs like these are great and important songs. However, I sometimes wonder if referring to **Our** God might not be a subtle way of avoiding personalizing God. When we change “Be With Me Lord,” to “be with *us*,” it always seems to lessen the lesson of the song. Being with us as a congregation is good, but once we separate from the assembly does that relieve God of the necessity of being with each person? Perhaps I am being overly sensitive, but I would much rather God be with me, and all the other me’s of the congregation, than with us only as a church. When God is the God of the aggregate it becomes easy to think that he cares for us as a whole, but doesn’t, or doesn’t have to, care for me as an individual.

I once knew a preacher who had what he later recognized as a bad habit. When someone would ask for the prayers of the congregation about a problem, he would pray for that person, but then pray for the entire congregation because they might be facing similar problems. If a person admitted to a need for stronger faith, he would say that we all need stronger faith. One day a counselor pointed out something to him that he had never considered. By attributing this person’s needs to the whole congregation he was trivializing that person. The individual is made to feel like their problem is not as important, because it is not their problem but the congregation’s. The preacher was saying, unintentionally, that their big concern was not really important enough to merit mentioning; that their individual problems were of less concern to God than the concerns of the collective church.

Sometimes we get the same feeling when we sing about “our” God. He cares about the church, but anything on a personal level is less important. This is not how God works. The collective church is important only because it is made up of saved individuals. God cares for the church because he cares for me.

“Therefore I will look unto the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation: my God will hear me.” (Mic 7:7) David recognized that God was not just the God of Israel. “The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust.” (Ps 18:2)

The “collectivization” of God creates another problem. As long as he is ours and not mine, I don’t have to worry about him on a personal level.

In America, a large segment of society has substituted belonging for being loved. I can belong to a dozen blogs and chat rooms and feel like I have value, in spite of the impersonal nature of the contact. I can belong to lodges and chambers of commerce and feel that I am part of something. In the same way I can sit in the assembly of the church and do nothing and feel that I am part of God’s body. So what if I slip out the back before the end of the closing prayer, so nobody knows I was even there. I am part of that church. Since God saved the church, I must be saved just because my name is in a church directory.

We are “created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” (Eph 2:10) If we don’t meet God’s expectations in this regard, is he obligated to accept us just because of our occasional attendance at an assembly? Jesus seemed to think otherwise. “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.” (Matt 7:21).

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with acknowledging that God is “our” God. When we do so, though, we must make sure that we are truly part of the collective group, rather than deceiving ourselves.

If my God is your God, then he *is* our God, but on an individual level. He is the one who will judge each of us. He no longer is seen as a God who cares about his church, but not the people in it. His care for the church is seen, as it truly is, as a care because of the people in it.

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WHY DID HE SAY THAT?

“When Christ is dying on the cross and cries out “My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me” my Baptist minister says this means that Jesus was separated from God (I guess he was taught that in seminary). Anyway, I pointed out to him that the EXACT same words are at the beginning of Psalms 22. Basically, I believe Jesus was quoting scripture showing that He was fulfilling the prophecy. I don’t believe Jesus was ever separated from God because God does not leave his children. What are your thoughts?”

This came to me from a correspondent on my web site. My response was as follows:

“The usual response is that God cannot abide sin, and since Jesus was bearing the sins of the whole world, God had to turn away from him. In this he would have been like the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement. He bore “all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins.” (Leviticus 16:21) Because God will give up on those who continue in sin and reject

David’s own anguish
became a prophecy of
the One who was to
come.

him (Romans 1:19-32), it is possible that, for this one brief moment, God separated himself from Jesus.

“On the other hand, I think your argument is equally valid, if not more so. The Jews consider that by quoting a part of a passage you are quoting the whole passage. Thus, in quoting part of Psalm 22, Jesus is telling the people who heard him that he was the Messiah that was predicted in that psalm. To the Jews that heard him, your interpretation is much more likely than the other.

“I believe both interpretations to be valid. Since sin separates from God, by bearing all sin he would have been more separate from God than we can imagine, and for one who had experienced the actual presence of God that must have been excruciating. But he also had an obligation to the crowd to tell them why he was not coming down from the cross (see the verses just before this in Matthew 27:42-44), and so used this verse to show he was the expected Messiah.”

I believe my questioner to have shown more of an understanding than many about what Jesus was

doing while on the cross. I don’t mean what he was doing in the sense of dying for sin. He did that. But I believe that everything that happened during the crucifixion was very specifically enacted by Jesus for a reason. Matthew would phrase it, as he often did, that this happened “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet.” (Matt 1:22, et al.) Jesus very deliberately chose to speak these words. I gave part of the reason in my answer to the one who made the same observation. Another part of the answer might be that he was calling attention to the facts that were right before the crowd. Psalm 22 was being fulfilled before their eyes and they could not, or would not, see it. He was, once again, trying to make them open their eyes.

The Psalm

Psalm 22 is almost universally considered a prophecy of the Messiah. It takes the form of many of David’s psalms—an apparent questioning of God which leads to a statement of triumphant faith. When David wrote it, it most likely applied to his own, often troubled, situation. Yet we can ask, as did the Ethiopian concerning Isaiah, “of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?” (Acts 8:24) When David cried out from the anguish of his own heart, was he also prophesying of the One to come? Most people agree that this was so.

He starts with the feeling that God has deserted him. “I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not.” (v. 2) He acknowledges God’s help in times past in the next verses, but then reverts to his despair. “I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people.” (v. 6) After a number of poetic descriptions of those who would oppose him, David pleads for God’s help. “But be not thou far from me, O LORD: O my strength, haste thee to help me.” (v. 19) The last half of the psalm turns into a paean of praise. He begins, “Ye that fear the LORD, praise him.” (v. 23) He ends by showing that God’s works will endure. “They shall come, and shall declare his righteousness unto a people that shall be born, that he hath done this.” (v. 31)

By quoting the beginning line of the psalm, Jesus is telling the people that it applies to him. He also is saying that even though he is on a cross, in pain and about to die, he will continue to praise God. Job said, “Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10) Jesus reverses the thought, declaring that even in the middle of receiving evil he would declare God to be good.

The Prophecies

Possibly no other single prophecy has as many specific fulfillments in the scene at the cross. Jesus wants people to see that he was the very specific object of this prophecy. Nobody else could claim to be Messiah, because nobody else could fulfill every prophecy in detail. Now some have argued that Jesus manipulated his life to fulfill prophecy so that he, though a man like any other, could become the Messiah. The problem with that theory is that Jesus was on the cross. So much of this psalm was fulfilled by others over whom he had no control. He could have arranged some things to meet the requirements of prophecy, but not the specifics of this psalm. If he could manipulate people, from the cross, to do the things they did around him, then he is even more powerful than these theorists would like him to be.

How much of this psalm is fulfilled around him? More than can be attributed to mere chance. More than can be attributed to human manipulation. Those who fulfill these prophecies are the very people who would deny that he was Messiah.

“I am a reproach of men, and despised of the people. All they that see me laugh me to scorn.” (Ps 22:6-7) This prophecy of a suffering Messiah was repeated by Isaiah. “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” (Isa 53:3) This same Jesus, who a week before had been given a triumph as he entered Jerusalem, was now being spit at and mocked. Even “they that were crucified with him reviled him.” (Mk 15:32) You have to be pretty well despised when your companions in execution despise you.

“They shake the head, saying, He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him. Let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him.” In the gospel accounts we read almost the same words. “He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God.” (Matt 27:43) Some might point to this as the strongest example of fulfillment of prophecy in the bunch. Perhaps, though, it is not coincidence but intent on the part of the priests and scribes. Jesus was being crucified for claiming to be Messiah. These people were familiar with the passages that were considered to be about the Messiah, and so they choose one to cast in his face. They recognized the similarity to this psalm, and they fling it at him, thus fulfilling the prophecy. God loves irony.

“Thou art my God from my mother’s belly.” (v. 10) This does not find its fulfillment on the cross, but in the birth. Even before conception, Gabriel announced, “that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.” (Lk 1:35) God had all this planned from

the beginning of man, and so, at least in the case of Jesus, God was involved even in the womb.

“My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws.” (v. 15) “After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst.” (Jn 19:28) John specifically points out that Jesus said this not just because he was thirsty, but to fulfil prophecy. There were other prophecies related to this, but the description of thirst in Psalm 22 certainly applies as well. Crucifixion was not an easy way of dying. Crucifixion on a possibly warm spring day, even though it became dark at noon, can be a thirsty task. For indeed it was a task for Jesus, a job for which he came to earth.

“They pierced my hands and my feet.” (v. 16) Crucifixion was not a new thing with the Romans. They just elevated it to an art. Few other forms of execution would involve piercing the hands and feet. People have

Knowing the scripture,
the priests cast his own
claims in Jesus’ face.

asked why Jesus came when he did. Perhaps one answer is that this was the time when the executioners would be able to fulfil this prophecy. Jesus was not the one who asked for crucifixion, although he knew it would happen. He certainly did not manipulate this. It is one example of those things done by others that point to the fact that he is Messiah.

“They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture.” (v. 18; Matt 27:35) Even the Romans unwittingly fulfilled the prophecies of Psalm 22. It is not certain in what circumstances David could have said this about himself. It may just be that he was guided by the Holy Spirit to write what he thought was simply a poetical account of what could happen to one so despised. Nevertheless, John points out that the Romans had to cast lots because of a seamless garment that they did not want to tear. Were it not for that coat the scripture would not have been fulfilled. Small things make a big difference.

The fulfillment of any one of these things would be amazing. The fulfillment of several of them in one person is unlikely. The fulfillment of all of them, mostly without conscious action on the part of the ones performing the acts, is overwhelming. From the cross Jesus could see them dividing the spoils. He could hear the priests mocking him. He could see the fulfillment of Psalm 22. It only made sense to draw the attention of others to what was happening. It only made sense to cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!”

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Why do we not find any non-Hispanic men named Jesus? There are a lot of people named Jesus (hay-SUS) in Spanish, but none in English. Many people name their children after people in the Bible. I know of people named Isaiah, Nathan, Mark, Matthew, Mary, Hannah, and many other biblical names. I take pride that both my given names, Timothy James, are prominent in the New Testament.

Sometimes we name children because we like the sound of the name, regardless of its history. Thus we find people named Jude, although rarely in its other form of Judas. History has a noted Queen Isabella, although most people would not use the version of that name found in the King James Bible—Jezebel. (Next time you meet an Isabel or Isabella call her Jezebel and see if you don't get slapped.)

Sometimes we name children after people we admire or wish to honor. That may be why there are so many people named after people in the Bible. Sephardic Jews often name a child after one they wish to honor, but will not name a child after a living relative. Ashkenazic Jews, on the other hand, often name children in honor of living relatives. The Russian practice is that the "middle" name, or patronymic, is that of the father. (Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky would have had a father named Ilya.)

Some men are named Joshua. A few may even be named Hosea. So why don't we use the other form of that same name, Jesus? In some cases it is clear that the parents who name the child do not honor Jesus. They may claim to believe. They may even attend assemblies of the church regularly. But their lives show that they don't honor Jesus. Naturally they are not going to use his name for their child. Still others may

choose not to name their child Jesus because they are afraid of the confusion or hurt that the child may eventually feel when those around him are using his name as an expletive.

Perhaps the principal reason most non-Hispanics do not give their children the name Jesus is because they hold it in especial reverence. Since at that name "every knee should bow" (Php 2:10), many may feel that giving a child that name would be to give him too much to live up to. After all, this is the savior of the world, the King of Kings. Nevertheless, many will name a child Christian, which is just as difficult a name to live up to.

Jesus took a man named Shimon (Simon) and renamed him Peter. Some say that Peter became the rock he was because he had been given the name. If this is so, then maybe we should name our sons Jesus. If Peter could live up to the name given him, then maybe we should encourage our children to live up to the name Jesus.

It used to be that names had meaning. Today many people make up names for their children, or use names (like Wendy) that were invented by writers. Except for a few names whose meanings are obvious (Stella=star, Grace, Mercy) most people couldn't give the original meaning of someone else's name. They don't know the meaning of Agatha (virtue) or Anastasia (resurrection), or that some names are forms of each other (Jacob/James, Jesus/Joshua). In a society where names no longer have meaning, it is unusual that the name of Jesus is not more common. On the other hand, maybe it is because one who bore that name was so uncommon that we reserve it only for uncommon uses.

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