

A SONG OF MESSIAH'S PASSION

Songs Of The Savior-Our Messiah Revealed In The Psalms

by Doug Goins

Here is a prayer of the cross that I have reviewed every Lenten season for the last thirty years, since my college days:

Help us really to dig in, Jesus, and be with you.

- After all the poor fiction and cheap biblical movies which have turned your life and death into almost bizarre superstition, Jesus, it's hard for me to see your cross as it really was.

-They've even turned Jerusalem into such a tourist attraction that it's not at all easy, even while walking along the actual ground you walked, to visualize anything with honesty or accuracy.

-I imagine it was sweaty and hot. When you said from the cross, "I thirst," I am sure you were very thirsty. It's easy for us today to say you were really thirsting for men's souls (and I'm sure you were), but isn't this just a dodge that keeps us from accepting the fact of your humanity? Why do we want to forget that you were a man, hanging on the cross for hours, who simply needed something to drink?

-Can we somehow get through all the decoration which has been developed about the cross and just be quiet and be there with you?

Why is reality about you so shocking to us, Lord?

-They've made the cross you hung on so pretty, Jesus.

-I know the real cross wasn't pretty at all. But I guess I understand why they want to make copies of it out of fine woods and even semiprecious stones, because you hung on it.

-Yet doesn't this romanticize your death, Lord, and give it a kind of gloss it didn't have? Your death was bloody and dirty and very real. Can't we face it that way, Jesus? And can't we face the fact that you were a real man, living a human life, as well as God?

(Malcolm Boyd, *Are You Running With Me, Jesus?*)

Psalm 22:1-21 is a passage I have struggled with all week, feeling inadequate to deal with it. This psalm may be the most amazing of all the messianic psalms that we're examining together in preparation for Easter week. The first twenty-one verses are a song of the cross. Apart from the gospel records themselves, these verses describe the crucifixion of Christ more accurately and in greater detail than any other portion of Scripture. King David, the psalmist, painted this picture a thousand years before Jesus Christ was born. This is one of the most powerful predictive passages of all time. I really feel that we're standing on holy ground before this text. We ought to take off our spiritual shoes and kneel before this profound mystery.

Our psalm examines the thinking of Jesus during those six hours from nine a.m. until three p.m. when he was hanging on the cross. We're going to see in him two conflicting emotions that alternate back and forth. They are described by the writer to the Hebrews (12:2): "...For the joy set before Him [he] endured the cross, despising the shame." Jesus did go to the cross with the clear vision of the joyful triumph to come through resurrection, but before he could realize that joy of victory, he had to endure a humiliating, bloody execution. Psalm 22:1-21 helps us understand how these emotions of joy and shame were entangled in his experience of the cross. So David's prophetic prayer of lament becomes the expression of the conflict within Jesus. The physical, emotional, and spiritual anguish of Golgatha did raise doubts in Jesus' mind. It tore at his very soul. And the trauma described in these verses is frighteningly real.

The Terror of Abandonment by God

The first two verses open with a heart-wrenching cry of dereliction. The question "Why?" speaks of the terror of abandonment by his Father that Jesus feels:

**My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?
Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning.
O my God, I cry by day, but Thou dost not answer;
And by night, but I have no rest.**

Jesus hung on the cross, dying in agony alone. It is true that there were other people all around him, but he was alone in a way that he had

never before experienced in his life. He had been left alone by his friends the night before as he prayed in Gethsemane. Remember, they fell asleep while he was praying. And then his anguished cry came, "Abba, Father! Is there any way for this cup to pass from me?" He had also been betrayed by a friend that night, and that betrayal had been accomplished with a kiss. He had been denied by another friend at dawn. Remember the profanity of Peter: "I don't know him! He's no friend of mine." Then all of his friends had abandoned him. So all through that early morning ordeal of mock trials and physical beatings, Jesus had stood alone. It had all been illegal, but it was deadly serious. He was never proven guilty of anything, but he was sentenced to death. And now he hung on the cross alone, and even God was gone. These first two verses record his painful scream of terror. Matthew 27:46 records these words in Aramaic because that is the language in which Jesus cried out. It was the language of his family, the language of intimate relationship. It is the same language in which he had cried out the night before, "Abba, Father!" Jesus cried out because at the time when he most needed God's presence and activity and prayed with the greatest intensity for God to be there, God was not there.

Sometimes we as Christians are made to think that we really never will have periods of doubt or distress, at least like this. We are told that if we do struggle spiritually, it is due to some inadequacy of ours, or because we are not sufficiently under the control of the Holy Spirit; or perhaps it is due to some unconfessed sin. But this is often not the case. Believers do hurt sometimes even when there is no spiritual weakness, no lack of faith, and no sinful failure. What we need as struggling Christians in times like that is someone to come alongside us and say, "I know what it feels like, I've hurt like that. I've experienced distance from God, and here is how God met the need...." That is what Jesus can do for us now as we identify with his abandonment by the Father.

Look again at those two verses. The sky is dark, the heavens are silent, and God is gone. As I struggled with this text last week it was as if those words didn't compute. God is never gone. He promises to never leave or forsake his people, that he will be nearer than a brother to us. God promises his people that the trials they face will never be greater than they can bear; there will always be an escape. They will be able to bear it because God cares. And yet for Jesus in his humanity on that dark afternoon, there was an unnatural stillness in the Jerusalem air--God was gone.

And there are times when this is how we feel as well: All the promises of the Bible notwithstanding, it really seems like God is gone. So in his human scream to a distant God, Jesus showed us that he did and does understand the worst fears of our human hearts, that he experienced what the medieval mystic John of the Cross called "the dark night of the soul."

Jesus' cry of dereliction had another edge to it as well because of what he had become. He was not just a good man who died unjustly. He had become sin for us, and that was the most awful thing about Jesus' death. He who had never committed a breach of Torah, and had kept faithfully the inner essence of the Law to God's perfect satisfaction--this is the One who was made to be sin itself as he died on the cross. Years after his death, the apostle Paul explained the cross this way (2 Corinthians 5:21): "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

I read a biography of Martin Luther a number of years ago. It said that this is one passage that Luther never preached on. He could never fathom this mystery. His wife Catherine talked of one entire day he spent in his study wrestling with this text. She heard him pacing back and forth. And over and over again she would hear him utter the statement, "God forsaking Jesus--no man can understand that."

Resolute faith

This psalm provides not only the deepest expression of human spiritual anguish, but it also provides the strongest assertions of resolute faith in the next three verses. Here we see the alternation between shame and fear and despair, and hope. Verses 3-5:

**Yet Thou art holy,
O Thou who art enthroned upon the praises of Israel.
In Thee our fathers trusted;
They trusted, and Thou didst deliver them.
To Thee they cried out, and were delivered;
In Thee they trusted, and were not disappointed.**

When we put verses 1-2 with verses 3-5, we see that one person can say both things in the same context; there is that dichotomy of shame and joy, of fear and faith. In fact, this may be the genuine marvel of the psalm: When a believer is hurting, he or she is still a believer. The one who screams at God still believes in God. That's why the prayer is addressed to him. In verses 1-2 three times the call is to "My God." In the Hebrew twice the name he uses to address God is *El Berith*, the mighty God of the covenant. Once it is *Elohim*, the mighty creator-sustainer God. That is what launches this confession of trust in verses 3-5.

Jesus recalls God's character in these three verses. He says God is the Holy One. There is no one like God; he is distinct-awesome, grand, perfect, sinless, and complete in himself. And the amazing thing is that Jesus says, even in the midst of the agony, that he is worthy of praise.

David gave Jesus some memories of Israel's salvation history. "...Our fathers trusted." These memories provide a basis for continuing trust in his Father, even on the cross. That word trust, which is used three times in verses 3-5, means to give God one's full weight, literally to

collapse onto him. So Jesus was hanging by the nails on the cross with the full weight of the sins of the world crushing him, and he remembered his faithful heavenly Father on whom he could collapse in confidence. He remembered his own heritage of faith, that from Abraham and Sarah onward there had always been men and women of faith who had prayed to God in times of deep distress. And God had been faithful in the history of his people. For that reason, Jesus claims the same faithfulness of God for himself. That is important for us as well when we are agonizing, to remember the God of history, the God of deliverance and salvation.

Dehumanizing Suffering

But as Jesus looked down from the cross at all the people gathered around in the scene below him, his present terrible circumstances were completely different from his memories of past history, and once again the alternation sets in. Verses 6-8 are another agonized cry of lament:

**But I am a worm, and not a man,
A reproach of men, and despised by the people.
All who see me sneer at me;
They separate with the lip, they wag the head, saying,
"Commit yourself to the LORD; let Him deliver him;
Let Him rescue him, because He delights in him."**

It is amazing how a person who is hurting experiences this movement back and forth between trust and hurt. That is how it really is, because the hurting believer is still trusting. But the hurt doesn't go away just because you trust. That was Jesus' experience. He had been beaten in the morning, and now he was hanging on the cross. The pain of his suffering was dehumanizing--"I am like a worm, not even a human being anymore." In the prophet Isaiah's own predictive description of Messiah as the suffering servant, he writes (52:14):

**"...His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man
and his form marred beyond human likeness...."**

In his dying Jesus was treated like a common criminal--despised, hated by society. It was as if he no longer had a right to live in society. Matthew records for us (see 27:39-43) the sneering sarcasm, the verbal abuse referred to in verses 6-8. He places the very words of verse 8 in the mouths of the unthinking multitude as they jeered at Jesus on the cross.

Remembering God's involvement

But Jesus' thoughts escaped the present terror of the cross as he once again thought back to the past to restore his confidence. This time he thought not about the salvation history of the nation Israel of which he was a part, but about God's intimate involvement with him personally. Verses 9-11:

**Yet Thou art He who didst bring me forth from the womb;
Thou didst make me trust when upon my mother's breasts.
Upon Thee I was cast from birth;
Thou hast been my God from my mother's womb.
Be not far from me, for trouble is near;
For there is none to help.**

Jesus remembers and affirms his lifelong relationship with his heavenly Father. He says it began in the womb. It was expressed through his birth and continued unbroken throughout his life. It is clear from the text that he first learned of this relationship from his mother. These words affirm the central role a mother has in the nurture of her child's developing faith in God. There is no one so helpless as a newborn infant, and for that child there is nothing so comforting as the arms and breasts of his or her mother. There is a real sense in which we first learn to trust in God's security, protection, and safety when we're held securely in our mother's arms. For the baby Jesus that mother was Mary, the woman Dr. Luke tells us to called "blessed among women" (1:42). It is amazing that Jesus would remember learning faith from his mother as he looked down at her standing at the foot of the cross with the other women and John.

It is in this setting of faith in the midst of despair, of confidence in the midst of lament, that the Savior is given the words he prays in verse 11. This is another cry for *Yahweh* to come near. Remember the pattern of the alternation between lament and confession. He believes he is alone and God must come near and take notice. Jesus cannot bear to die alone. This whole section turns on the distancing and the nearness of God.

The crucifixion foretold

Verses 12-18 focus a final time on the agony of Jesus' crucifixion:

**Many bulls have surrounded me;
Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled me.
They open wide their mouth at me,
As a ravening and a roaring lion.**

**I am poured out like water,
 And all my bones are out of joint;
 My heart is like wax;
 It is melted within me.
 My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
 And my tongue cleaves to my jaws;
 And Thou dost lay me in the dust of death.
 For dogs have surrounded me;
 A band of evildoers has encompassed me;
 They pierced my hands and my feet.
 I can count all my bones.
 They look, they stare at me;
 They divide my garments among them,
 And for my clothing they cast lots.**

Crucifixion was a Roman form of execution. It was unknown among the Hebrew people at the time of David. But the language of David in this central part of Psalm 22 is simply stunning. He uses hyperbole to accentuate his own suffering (we have no idea what personal experience David might be describing in these verses), and his impassioned language builds vivid word pictures. The Holy Spirit of God inspired David to describe the sufferings of our Savior in terms that weren't part of his own experience. We have seen that pattern over and over again in all these messianic psalms that we have been studying together (see [Discovery Papers 4424-4427](#)).

Notice the descriptive phrases that David uses in his prophetic song, images that Jesus claims as his own on the cross. Verses 12-13 describe the scene from the cross. Jesus looks down and sees himself encircled by his executioners, and they are like dangerous animals. The jeering crowd, the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman soldiers are like charging bulls or roaring lions. In verse 16 he says they are like wild dogs, and as he looks out they seem irresistible, overwhelming, frightening, and destructive. Have you ever had nightmares in which you were being chased by a monster or beast? If you have, and you awakened with your heart pounding, glad that you were awake, then you can understand and identify a little bit with the terror that Jesus felt as he saw himself encircled by ravening monsters, slaving beasts.

Verses 14-15 describe his exhaustion on the cross, his intense physical suffering as he was dying. His body was thrust forward in an unnatural position, and it caused his internal organs to press painfully against each other. He was greatly dehydrated. The weight of his body was pulling his bones out of their sockets. His heart was barely functioning.

The last phrase of verse 15 is very important. He says to his Father, "...And Thou dost lay me in the dust of death." Jesus acknowledges here that God is at work through his suffering and death. It is God who will bring him to death. Jesus will experience no vindication, no justification, no reward in this life. All of that will be accomplished through resurrection.

Verses 16-18 are amazing in their graphic detail. He is surrounded by a band of evildoers. His hands and feet have been pierced. His bones (in his rib cage) can be counted. They look at him, they stare at him. The Roman soldiers divide his garments among themselves, gambling for his clothing (see Matthew 27:35). Again, the enemies are like animals, like dogs barking at him, hurling abuse and curses. When verse 16 mentions evil, it is supernatural, satanic evil at work in the cross. Earlier in the day Jesus had said to his enemies, "...This is your hour-when the power of darkness reigns" (Luke 22:53). He has been stripped naked (that is how they can see all the ribs in his rib cage). That was all part of the humiliation of the condemned criminal, dying without a shred of dignity left.

Trusting the answer will come

So with the power of the dog at work, with no God near, Jesus offers up one final cry for his heavenly Father to come near and deliver him. This final appeal ends on an amazing note of confidence, of hope and trust. Verses 19-21:

**But Thou, O LORD, be not far off;
 O Thou my help, hasten to my assistance.
 Deliver my soul from the sword,
 My only life from the power of the dog.
 Save me from the lion's mouth;
 And from the horns of the wild oxen Thou dost answer me.**

When he says in verse 20, "Deliver my soul...my only life..." it is really "my precious life," the life that is most dear to him. It indicates that Jesus didn't die calmly, serenely, tranquilly. He died in agony. God built into him a strong survival instinct, just as he did in the rest of us. It was not easy for Jesus to let go and give up.

"Thou dost answer me," or perhaps "Thou hast answered me," the phrase that ends this section, is one word in the Hebrew, a verb in the perfect tense. It means specifically that the answer is in process. He is saying, "I may not feel it or see it, but I choose to believe that you are a God who answers, and the answer has begun." Jesus' cry from the cross, his last, one of his dying breaths, is recorded by Dr. Luke in his gospel (23:46): "Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit." He died certain that God would act. So the petition is complete. He has expressed both his pain and his hope, and now it is up to God to act.

For the psalmist and for Jesus there remains, in the rest of the psalm, the vow to praise God and the anticipation that God will answer his prayer. In the next message we will rejoice together at God's powerful, creative answer to this prayer of Messiah. Beginning with verse 22 and continuing to the end, verse 31, there is a great celebration of triumph, of resurrection.

But what happened this day when Jesus, God's only Son, was on the cross can never fully be understood. The mystery is too great. However, its powerful, saving, life-transforming effect is most evident. All we have to do is look around at people in the body of Christ whose lives have been changed because of the cross of Jesus. Listen to this wonderful, prophetic description of Christ's wounding for us and its dramatic effect from which we benefit in Isaiah 53:4-6:

**"Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all."**

The weight of our sin under which he died is clear in this passage. Yet the incredible result is that we have peace as a lifestyle with our Father in heaven, with ourselves internally, and with people with whom we live. Jesus died to give us *shalom*, and also to bring healing. By his wounds we have spiritual healing from sin-sickness, healing in relationships, and restoration from the illnesses that life and circumstances and others have wreaked on us.

Let me close with these words from Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great British preacher. This is his reflection on the significance of Christ's wounding for us:

Christ's wounds kill my suspicion and fears. A crucified Savior is the life of faith, and the death of unbelief. Can you view the flowing of the Savior's precious blood upon the tree of doom, and not trust Him? What more can He do to prove His sincerity than to die for us? His life is the mirror of love, but in His death, the sun shines on it with a blaze of glory.

Catalog No. 4428
Psalm 22:1-21
FourthMessage
Doug Goins
March 19, 1995
Updated October 21, 2000

[Back to Doug Goins' Home Page](#)

Copyright (C) 1995 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.