

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Comments from Book 1 of the Psalms: Psalm 22

Psalms 22, 23 and 24 have often been referred to as the cross, the crook and the crown. They were written by King David, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus Christ. The psalms refer to the psalmist's own experience of God but also refer, in a prophetic way, to the coming Messiah. These three remarkable psalms give a wonderful understanding of the past, present and future ministry of Christ. In Psalm 22 we look back to His sufferings for us upon the cross and also the glorious results of those sufferings. In Psalm 23 we see His present shepherd-like care for us throughout our lives. In Psalm 24 we look forward to the day when He will be owned as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This morning, however, we must concentrate on Psalm 22.

It is always difficult to write or speak about the sufferings of Christ. We tend to shy away from looking too deeply into what happened at the cross. It is of course holy ground and we should approach the subject with a deep sense of reverence. However, it was the Lord Jesus Himself who instituted a means by which we would always remember His sacrifice for us. We know it as the "Lord's Supper", or the "Breaking of Bread". It is recorded in each of the synoptic Gospels and Paul writes about it in more detail in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. It appears from Acts 20:7 that the early Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper at the beginning of each new week. Central to the Lord's Supper are His words, "Do this in remembrance of Me." (Luke 22:19). It was in the Lord's heart that His people should regularly meet together to remember the sacrifice He made for them. Why is this so important? Because by nature we tend to easily forget. Genesis records the life of Joseph. During his imprisonment, he interpreted the dream of Pharaoh's disgraced cup-bearer and told him he would be restored to his former position. Joseph also had a request for the cup-bearer. He said, "When it is well with you, remember me". Sadly, for a long time, the man forgot Joseph. We have to ask ourselves how easily do we forget how much the Lord suffered to save us? Is it something in the distant past or something for which we give thanks every day of our lives? George Whitfield, the great puritan preacher, studied in Oxford and was converted there. He wrote that, whenever he visited the city, he would run to the field where he had trusted Christ to fall down and give thanks to God.

In the Old Testament we find many prophecies and pictures which relate to the suffering and glory of Christ. In Luke 24, as Jesus walked with two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus, He said to them, "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory? And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself."

The whole of the Old Testament is filled with references to the Lord Jesus and Psalm 22 is one of the outstanding prophecies of the sufferings of Christ. It is a psalm which unfolds to us in the most poignant way what Christ endured upon the cross for our salvation. It speaks to every Christian's heart about the depth of Christ's love - a love which should never be forgotten and which should move us to greater devotion and service for the Lord. Psalm 22 can be divided into two sections: the sufferings of the cross, (verses 1-21a) and the glory of the cross (verses 21b-31).

There are seven statements which the Lord Jesus made from the cross. The fourth and central one was the opening words of Psalm 22. "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" The Lord Jesus was the only man who ever had the right to ask God why He was forsaken. There was nothing in Him which deserved being abandoned by God at Calvary. But forsaken He was. It was God's judgement of sin and, as Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 5:21, God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." He bore God's judgement against sin so that we could escape it. This is something we can seek to appreciate but will never fully understand. Elizabeth Clephane describes it beautifully in her hymn, "*There were ninety and nine*". Verse 3 of the hymn reads,

*"But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed,
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through
Ere He found the sheep that was lost."*

The heart rending opening verse of Psalm 22 leads us to an appreciation of what the Lord passed through at Calvary. It is important to see that the words are addressed to God. When we think of Calvary, we often concentrate upon the physical suffering which the Lord endured at the hands of men. But the cross is about God's judgement against sin

and His love for sinners. The Lord had to pass through God's judgement against sin. As a Man here on earth He had enjoyed complete communion with God. At the cross He was forsaken by God. He was forsaken so that we might never be forsaken.

Within the first section of the Psalm - the suffering of the cross, there are four passages which begin with the word "but".

- The first one is verses 3-5 "But You are holy". These verses teach us about the holiness of the cross.
- The second passage is verses 6-8, "But I am a worm, and no man". These verses teach us about the lowliness of the cross.
- The third passage is verses 9-18, "But You are He who took me out of the womb". These verses teach us about the sovereignty of the cross.
- The final passage, verses 19-21, "But You, O LORD, do not be far from Me", teaches us about God's answer to Christ's sufferings on the cross.

But You are holy - verses 3-5

In the first passage, the Psalmist recalls how it was a Holy God who was the theme of the praises of Israel. The Israelites had trusted in this Holy God for centuries and He had delivered them. At the cross we see the greatest demonstration of the holiness of God - His complete and utter judgement of sin. Today we live in an unholy world - a society in which goodness and righteousness is often scorned and derided and unrighteousness excused and sometimes applauded. Right and wrong are confused and the world bears the consequences. Paul wrote in the first century of a world which would become both unthankful and unholy. At the cross, God acted in absolute holiness and revealed His absolute love. In the past, His people had experienced a God who delivered them when they trusted Him. When God called Moses to lead the children Israel out of Egypt, He said, "And I am come down to deliver them". The true meaning of these words was fulfilled at Calvary when the Son of God came down into suffering and death in order to bring about the greatest deliverance. After Calvary, all the peoples of the world would have the opportunity to trust in the Lord and know His salvation.

But I am a worm, and no man - verses 6-8

If Calvary revealed the holiness of God in His judgement against sin, then it also revealed the lowliness of Christ. In our second passage the Psalmist writes, "But I am a worm and no man". He goes on to speak of his reproach and how he was despised and mocked. All these things were the experience of Christ at the hands of His own people and the Romans. Verse 8 was literally fulfilled. In Matthew 27:43 we read, "He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" The lowliness of Christ is further described in Isaiah 53:3, "He is despised and rejected by men." In Philippians 2 Paul traces the lowliness of Christ. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."

But You are He who took me out of the womb - verse 9

In the next passage of our psalm we read, "But You are He who took me out of the womb" (verse 9). God's sovereign will was in action in sending His Son into the world. Verses 9 and 10 remind us vividly of the birth and life of Christ - born of a virgin and from childhood serving God. In the words of Luke 2:52, "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men." The sovereign will of God had brought His Son Jesus into the world and the ultimate purpose of that will was to give up His son in sacrifice for the salvation of the whole world. God "who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all" (Romans 8:32).

The circumstances of Calvary are described exactly in verses 12 and 13. The Lord was surrounded by those who hated Him without a cause. His persecutors acted as wild beasts. Bulls, strong bulls of Bashan and lions are the metaphors the psalmist uses. Bashan was a place renowned for its rich pastures and great cattle. This part of the psalm contrasts the weakness the Lord with the strength of His enemies. They showed no mercy or human emotion just like wild beasts. The Jews, who had known so much of God's blessing, and the Romans, who prided themselves in their power and justice, demonstrated the depravity of excessive hatred and violence. Christ was the object of their stream of inhuman abuse and cruelty.

Verses 13-17 are recognised as a most graphic account of death by crucifixion. This is all the more remarkable because it was written by King David. Crucifixion was unknown in his day. And the piercing he describes in verse 16 was not his own experience. The only explanation of these verses is that the Spirit of God empowered David to prophetically outline what the suffering Messiah would have to endure. These sufferings and poverty under God's sovereign will are the basis of our blessing. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord

Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." What little the Lord Jesus possessed in this world, He watched the soldiers share and cast lots over. His poverty was so immense because His wealth was so great.

When I was in business I would often stay at hotels. There was a business magazine in the hotel rooms which I sometimes read. In it was listed the world's wealthiest people. At the top of the list was Bill Gates, the head of Microsoft, whose fortune is measured in billions of dollars. I remember, as I looked down this list, thinking that, no matter how materially rich we become, our riches can always be measured. They are finite. The wealth of the Son of God is infinite. And the poverty He knew at Calvary was immeasurable. He became poor so that we could be rich. In the words of His own parable about the pearl of great price He, "went and sold all that he had and bought it."

But You, O LORD, do not be far from Me - verses 19-21

The final "But" passage is verses 19-21, "But You, O LORD, do not be far from me". It is a passage about God's answer to Christ's sufferings at Calvary. In these verses a vivid picture is drawn of the forces ranged against the Lord. "The sword" is perhaps an illustration of death. "The power of the dog" is a reference to religious hypocrisy and evil action. Paul uses the word to describe ungodly Jews in Philippians 3:2. "The lion's mouth" and "the horns of the wild oxen" are pictures of the strength and ferocity of powerful forces. We should not forget it was a Gentile and unjust world power, Rome, which crucified the Son of God. Satan is also described by Peter as like "a roaring lion". The terrible forces arrayed at Calvary were certainly energised by Satan. The cry of the Messiah in verse 20 is the cry of an only child - a wonderful reference to the God's only begotten Son. Towards the end of verse 21 there is a pause before the final statement, "You have answered me". At the cross the Lord's final words are of victory, "It is finished", which is one word in the original language, and also of power, "Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit." Jesus said in John 10 that He had the power to lay down His life and also the power to take it up in resurrection.

The wonderful statement "You have answered me", marks the change of theme from the suffering of Calvary to the glory of Calvary. God answered the suffering of His son upon the cross. When Christ's work upon the cross was completed, God raised His Son from the dead and began to build the Church. In verses 22 to 31 there are several aspects of the glory of Calvary.

The first aspect is relationship. In verse 22 the Psalmist writes, "I will declare Your name to my brethren". On the resurrection day Jesus told Mary, "Go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending unto my Father and your Father, to My God and your God." Through Christ's work upon the cross God has become our Father and we are described by the Lord as His brethren. Christians are brought into the family of God. It is a family that is characterised by praise and worship (verse 23). The disciples saw the Lord in resurrection and saw Him return to heaven and their hearts were filled with praise. Wherever the gospel is preached hearts are filled with praise and God is glorified. The psalmist's words are still being fulfilled. This theme of praise runs through the rest of this remarkable psalm.

There is also the encouragement that God will hear us in our time of need (verse 24). Calvary is a constant reminder that God does not overlook the needs of His people. Hebrews 4 explains that Jesus is our high priest who sympathises with us in our weaknesses and there is also a throne of grace which we can boldly approach to find help in a time of need. One of the great lessons of Calvary is that not only has God's love saved but it flows out to us throughout the rest of our lives.

The extent of the work of Calvary goes beyond the blessing of God's people. Ultimately it will result in the blessing of the whole world (verse 27). Of course, now as the word of God is preached and the Christian testimony goes on, people throughout the whole world are blessed. But the psalmist has a more universal blessing in mind when he writes, "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the LORD's and He rules over the nations." (verses 27 and 28). Even though the gospel has been spread far and wide throughout the world, we could not claim the world wide subjection to God which this psalm promises. Therefore, it must look forward a coming day when Christ will reign supreme. This is why the connection with Philippians 2 is so important. Paul, like David looked forward to a time when "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

At the end of verse 29 we find the phrase "even he who cannot keep himself alive". It has been suggested this phrase starts a new verse and should be translated "As for Him that caused not His soul to live". In other words it is a reference to the Messiah who voluntarily gave His life so that a coming generation would enter into the blessing of His work. This would certainly appeal to our own hearts since we today are amongst those of whom Jesus said to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Arthur Clarke, a missionary to China, wrote most of his book, "*Analytical Studies in the Psalms*", whilst imprisoned by the Japanese during the war. In the foreword WE Vine writes, "*The brightest and best steel comes through the hottest furnace. The beauty of the pearl is the result of the bitterness of pain. The most gorgeous butterflies gain their freedom by means of a struggle through the thickest cocoons.*"

The greatest triumphs, the highest joys, the most transcendent glory are the outcome of the unutterable woes and judgement of Christ's sufferings on the cross.

This morning, as we have contemplated the sufferings of Christ and the glory which has followed, may it cause us to bow down and worship the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us. May it also encourage us to serve Him more faithfully in a world which so much needs the love displayed at Calvary - A love which has not changed.

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