

A SONG OF MESSIAH'S PASSION

Songs Of The Savior-Our Messiah Revealed In The Psalms

by Doug Goins

I want to read a prayer for you, a prayer I have reviewed during every Lenten season for the last thirty years. I found this prayer when I was in college. It's a prayer of the cross:

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 semi-precious 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?

We're in a sermon series entitled "Songs of the Savior: Our Messiah Revealed in the Psalms." This morning we come to a scripture passage that's the first half of Psalm 22. It's a passage with which I have struggled all week. It's a passage with which I don't feel adequate to deal. This may be the most amazing of all the messianic psalms that we're examining together in preparation for Easter week here at PBC. Psalm 22, the first twenty-one verses, is 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 this morning before this text. We ought to take off our spiritual shoes, we ought to kneel before mystery that's profound, deep.

The worship that we've enjoyed together, the music, the reading from Matthew 27, from Matthew's eyewitness account of the crucifixion prepares us to examine together those six hours in which Jesus hung on the cross from nine o'clock in the morning until three in the afternoon. Our psalm examines the thinking of Jesus during his crucifixion. We're going to see two conflicting emotions that alternate back and forth. Those emotions are described by the writer of the Hebrews. He says of the cross: "For the joy that was 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 that joy of victory could be realized, Jesus had to endure a humiliating, blood-spattered execution.

Psalm 22:1-21 help 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, spiritual anguish of Golgatha did raise doubts in Jesus' mind. It tore at his very soul. And the trauma described in these verses is very real, frighteningly so. It opens in the first two verses with a heart-wrenching cry of dereliction. The question "Why?" speaks of the terror that Jesus feels of abandonment by his Father:

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 hangs on the cross, dying in agony, and he's alone. Yes, there are other people there all around him, but he's alone in a way that he's never experienced in his life before. He had been left alone the night before as he prayed in Gethsemane. Remember his friends fell asleep while he was praying. And there the anguished cry comes, "Abba, Father! Is there any way for this cup to pass from me." He was betrayed by a friend that night, and that betrayal was done with a kiss. He was denied by a friend at dawn. Remember the profanity of Peter, "I don't know him! He's no friend of mine." Then all of his friends abandoned him. So all through that early morning ordeal Jesus stood alone, through the mock trials, through the physical beatings. It was all illegal, but it was deadly serious.

He was never proven guilty of anything, but he was sentenced to death. And now he hangs suspended alone, even God is gone. These first two verses record his scream of painful terror. The passage that Craig read for us in Matthew 27, Matthew recorded the words in Aramaic because that's the language that Jesus cried out in. That was the tongue of his family, that was the language of his household, the language of intimate relationship. It's the same language in which he cried out the night before, "Abba, Father!" Jesus cries out because of the distancing of God from his hurt at the time when Jesus most needs his presence and activity. When Jesus prays with the greatest intensity for God to be there, God is not there. Sometimes, as Christians, we're made to think that we really never will have periods of doubt or distress, at least like this. We're told that if we do struggle spiritually it is due to some inadequacy on our part, or we're not really spiritual, or we're sufficiently under the control of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps it's due to some unconfessed sin, but it isn't true. Believers do hurt sometimes, even when there is no spiritual weakness, there is no lack of faith, and there is no sinful failure. What we need as struggling Christians in times like that is someone to come alongside of us and say, "Yeah, I know what it feels like. I've hurt like that. I've experienced distance from God, and here's how God met the need." That's what Jesus can do for us this morning as we identify with his abandonment by the Father. Look at him again in terms of those two verses. The sky is dark, the heavens are silent, and God is gone.

As I struggled with this text this week it's as if those words didn't compute. God is never gone. He promises to never leave or forsake his people. The promise is that God will be nearer than a brother to us. God makes promises to his people that the trials they face will never be stronger than they can bear. There will always be an escape. They will be able to bear it because God cares. And yet for Jesus 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, there are times in the Christian life when it really seems like God is gone. And that is what Jesus felt in his humanity as he hung on the cross that day. In his human scream to a distant God, Jesus shows us that he does understand the worst fears of our human hearts, experienced what the medieval mystic John of the Cross called "the dark night of the soul."

His cry of dereliction had another edge to it, as well. Because of what he had become, as he became sin for us, there was more than just the human feeling that God was different. This was not just a good man who died unjustly. The most awful thing about his death was that he became sin. Jesus, who never committed a breach of Torah, who 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, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God." It is what he had become that was so terrible."

I once read a biography of Martin Luther a number of years ago. This is one passage that Luther never preached on. He could never bring himself to 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." This psalm provides not only the deepest expression of human pain, of spiritual anguish, but it also provides the strongest assertions of resolute faith, and that's true in the next three verses that follow these opening two. Again, the alternation between shame and fear and despair and hope. Verses 3 through 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.

Again, when you put the first two verses with the next three verses we identify with our suffering Savior because the same person may say both things in the same context. There's that dichotomy of shame and joy, of fear and faith. In fact, this may be the genuine marvel of the psalm, because when a believer is hurting that person is still a believer. The one who screams at God still believes in God. That's why the prayer is addressed to him. In the opening section three times the call is to "My God." Twice it's El Berith, the mighty God of the covenant. Once it is Elohim, the mighty creator, sustainer God. That's what launches this confession of trust that we read in verses 3 through 5. David gave Jesus these memories of Israel's salvation history, "Our fathers who trusted." They provide a basis for continuing trust in his Father, even on the cross. That word trust that's used three times in verses 3 through 5 means to give God one's full weight, literally to collapse on God. So there's Jesus hanging by the nails on the cross with the full weight of the sins of the world crushing him. He remembers his faithful heavenly Father on whom he can collapse himself in confidence.

He recalls God's character. He says "Yahweh is the Holy One" in those three verses. There is no one like God. He is distinct, he is awesome, he is grand, he is perfect, he is sinless, he's complete in himself. And the amazing thing Jesus says, even in the agony, is that he's worthy of praise, he is deserving of praise. Jesus in his humanity remembers his own heritage of faith, from Abraham and Sarah onward there have always been men and women of faith who have prayed to God in times of deep distress. God has been faithful to this national family, this history of the people of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For that reason, Jesus claims the same faithfulness for himself. That's important for us as well when we're agonizing, to remember the God of history, the God of deliverance and salvation. But as Jesus looks down from the cross at the scene below him, all the people gathered around, his memories of past history are completely different from his present terrible circumstances, and once again the alternation sets in. Verses 6 through 8 speak of another agonizing 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's amazing reality of how a person who is hurting really feels, this movement back and forth between trust and hurt. That's how it really is, because the hurting believer is still trusting. But just because you trust it doesn't make the hurt go away. It was Jesus' experience. He was beaten in the morning, and now he's

hanging on the cross. And the pain of his suffering is dehumanizing--I'm like a worm, not even a human being anymore. The prophet Isaiah described the reality that's described here. In his own predictive description of the suffering servant, Messiah, Isaiah writes: "His appearance was so disfigured--beyond that of any man--and his form marred beyond any human likeness" (52:14). In his dying Jesus is treated like a common criminal, despised, hated by society. It's as if he has no right to live in society left. That's how he's dying. Matthew recorded for us the sneering sarcasm, the verbal abuse that's referred to here in verses 6 through 8. And he places the very words of verse 8 here in Psalm 22 in the mouths of the unthinking multitude. They actually said the words in jeering Jesus on the cross. But once more Jesus' thoughts escape the present terror of the cross and he thinks back to the past once again to restore his confidence. But this time it's not the salvation history of the nation Israel of which he's apart, but he thinks about God's intimate involvement with him personally. Verses 9 through 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 he affirms his lifelong relationship with his heavenly Father. He says it began in utero, in the womb. It was expressed through his birth, it continued unbroken throughout his life. It's clear from the text that he first learned of this relationship from his mother. As I thought about it this week I realized that these words affirm the central role a mother has in the nurture of her child's developing faith in God. There is nothing so helpless as a newborn infant. For that child, there is nothing so comforting as the arms and breasts as its mother. There is a real sense in which we first learn to trust God's security, God's protection, his safety when we're held securely in our mother's arms. For the baby Jesus that mother was Mary, the woman that Dr. Luke tells us to called blessed among women. It's amazing that Jesus would speak of learning faith from his mother as he looks down at her standing at the foot of the cross with the other women, with John. It's in this setting of faith in the midst of despair, of confidence in the midst of lament that the Savior is given words to pray in verse 11. It's another cry for Yahweh to come near. Remember the pattern, the alternation of lament and confession. He believes he is alone, God must come near, God must take notice. Jesus cannot bear to die alone. This whole section turns on the distancing and the nearness of God.

Jesus now in verses 12 through 18 focuses a final time on his agony of 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, and it's suffering we don't know anything about. We have no idea what personal experience that David might be describing in these verses, but his impassioned language builds vivid word pictures. The Holy Spirit of God has inspired David to describe the sufferings of our Savior in language that wasn't part of his own experience. We've seen that pattern over and over again in all these messianic psalms that we've studied together. Notice the descriptive phrases that David uses in his prophetic song, images that Jesus claims as his own on the cross. Verses 12 and 13 describe the scene from the cross. Jesus looks down and sees himself encircled by enemies, his executioners, and they're like dangerous animals. The jeering crowd, the Jewish religious leaders, the Roman soldiers, they're like charging bulls, like roaring lions.

In verse 16, he said that they're like wild dogs, and as he looks out they seem irresistible, overwhelming, frightening, destructive. Have you ever had nightmares where you were being chased by a monster or by a beast? If you have, and you have awakened with your heart pounding, glad that you're awake now, 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 and 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 causes his internal organs to press painfully against each other. He's greatly dehydrated, he says. The weight of his body is pulling his bones out of joint, out of the sockets. His heart is 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 that will be accomplished through resurrection.

Verses 16 through 18 are amazing in terms of the graphic detail, the description. Dogs are surrounding him, "evil encompasses me," is what he says in verse 16. His hands and feet have been pierced. His bones can be counted, his rib cage. They look at me, they stare at me, they divide my garments among them, they gamble for his clothing. Again, the enemies are like animals, yapping dogs, barking at him, hurling abuse, curses. Matthew, in the passage we read this morning, describe the crowds hurling abuse and wagging their heads. The psalm also says that there's evil at work, supernatural evil, satanic evil at work in the cross. Earlier in the day Jesus had said to his enemies, "This your hour, and the power of darkness." The Roman soldiers had driven nails through his hands and feet. He had been stripped naked. That's the reason they could see all the ribs in his rib cage. It's part of the humiliation of the condemned criminal, dying without a shred of dignity left.

So his bones are thrust out from their natural position as he hangs there dying, and he's being stared at by his tormentors. As Matthew told us in chapter 27 the Roman soldiers were gambling for his clothing. So with the dogs below him--the power of the dog, as it says here--at work, with no God near, Jesus offers up one final cry for his heavenly Father to come near, to deliver him. This final appeal ends on amazing note of confidence, of hope, of trust. Verse 19:

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" and says, "my only life" he wants delivered, really it's my

precious life, my only life, the life that's most dear to me. It indicates that Jesus didn't die calmly, serenely, tranquilly. No, he died in agony. Just like the rest of us, God built in him a strong survival instinct. It was not easy to let go and give up. That phrase that ends this sentence in the Hebrew--and I'm sorry it doesn't show up in the New International Version--is one Hebrew word. It's a verb in the perfect tense, "Thou dost answer me" or perhaps "Thou thou hast answered me." It means specifically the answer is in process. I may not experience it, I may not feel it, I may not see it, but I choose to believe that you're a God who answers, and the answer has begun. Jesus' final cry from the cross, his last dying breath, is recorded by Dr. Luke in his gospel, "Father, into Thy hands I commend 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 really 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, the anticipation that he will answer his prayer.

Next Sunday morning we'll rejoice together at God's powerful, creative answer to this prayer of Messiah, because beginning with verse 22 in our psalm and continuing to the end, verse 31, there's 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, it's effect, the powerful, saving, life-transforming effect is real evident. All we have to do is look around us at people whose lives have been changed because of the cross of Jesus.

We're going to come to the Lord's table now to remember in a physical, tangible way his dying on the cross. We're going to take the bread of mystery, the potent symbol of his broken body. We're going to take the cup of salvation, symbolizing his shed blood, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Listen to this wonderful, prophetic description of Christ's wounding for us and its dramatic effect from which we benefit. It's from 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 hastened to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Again, the weight of our sin under which he died is so clear in this passage. And yet, the incredible result, we have peace as a life style, with our Father in heaven, with ourselves internally, with people with whom we live. Jesus died to give us shalom, and also to bring healing. We are healed by his wounds, spiritual healing from sin sickness, healing in relationships, 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, his reflection on the significance of Christ's wounding for us. Spurgeon says, "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."

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