

The Psalm of the Cross

Psalm 22

Main point: A cry of anguish and a song of praise to God for His deliverance in death and redemption of His people.

Introduction:

Dr. Sinclair Ferguson describes the language of Psalm 22 as “the starkest words in the human vocabulary and the most stunning words in any piece of literature in any language.” Just reading them hits us like the staggering opening bar of some great symphony that will touch us to the depths of our beings.

Often called a “Crucifixion Psalm,” this psalm is clearly a Messianic Psalm giving us a detailed prophetic description of our Lord’s crucifixion almost 1000 years before the actual event. Spurgeon writes, “For plaintive expressions uprising from unutterable depths of woe we may say of this psalm, ‘there is none like it.’ It is a photograph of our Lord’s saddest hours, the record of His dying words, the container of His last tears, and the memorial of His expiring joys.”

Before us in Psalm 22, we have a description of both the darkness and glory of the Cross, the sufferings of Christ, and the glory to follow (*Heb.2:9*).

Psalm 22, 23, and 24 form a brief trifecta on the Messiah. Reading them together sets before our eyes a three-fold view of Christ like no other. Here David is given three categories of revelation or three elements of the redemptive work of Christ. In Psalm 22, we see Christ as *Savior*. In Psalm 23, we see Christ as *Shepherd*. In Psalm 24, we see Christ as *Sovereign*. In Psalm 22, we see *His gracious sacrifice*. In Psalm 23, He is *the Good Shepherd*, and in Psalm 24, *the Glorious Sovereign*. The *Savior’s cross*, the *Shepherd’s crook*, and the *Sovereign’s crown* are beautifully combined in the heart of Book 1 of the ancient Psalter.

If you ever wondered what was in the heart and mind of Jesus Christ when He died upon the cross for our sins, Psalm 22 takes us inside the mind of Christ. David was not only a king, but according to Acts 2:30, he was a *prophet*. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, David is given revelation about crucifixion, which he was not familiar with as a form of punishment in his time. He is given insights into a future that hasn’t even happened. He is given a glimpse of the cross clearer than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Centuries before crucifixion was a reality, or Christ took onto Himself human flesh, God, who prophetically sees down through the history to the future, gives to David a view of the cross and all its meaning. So vivid are the details that we are airlifted there, as it were, on the day Jesus died, and we are gathered around the cross with the crowd to see Calvary.

Behind the manifested sorrows of Christ, we discover “a love so amazing, a condescension so unparalleled, a holiness so spotless, a justice so inflexible, a wisdom so boundless that without the explanation of Scripture, we would have no idea of what’s going on in the suffering and death of the man named Jesus.”¹

The subscription of this Psalm is both *meaningful* and *mysterious*. *Ajeleth Hashshahar* are rare Hebrew words. *Ajeleth* means *young deer or hind*. The word *Hashshahar* means *morning*. Whether this is the title of the Psalm or some tune entitled, *The Doe of the Morning*, we cannot say with certainty. If it is the title, then perhaps

¹ Joe Morecraft III, sermon

David was thinking of a deer early in the morning. What is a deer like early in the morning when it is feeding? It is hunted! When the doe comes out of its resting place at dawn and begins to feed, the hunters go after the deer and begin to "persecute it" as it were. And so, a deer came to be a symbol for *persecuted or suffering innocence*.

David is inspired to write this Messianic Psalm about Christ, like a hunted deer, persecuted in His innocence whose deliverance came early in the morning on resurrection day.

What is the structure of this psalm? Two words describe the clear movement of this psalm. In verses 1-21, we see a prayer for help. In verses 22-31, we hear a praise for deliverance. Today, we will only consider part 1.

Exposition:

A. A Prayer for Help (vv.1-21)

Under this first heading, David contrasts two past reports of God's help in trouble with his present sense of God's desertion. The first contrast focuses on *God's silence (vv.2-5)*, and the second focuses on *God's failure to act or God's absence (vv.6-11)*. The expression "**yet You**" marks the contrast in verses 3 and 9.

What the psalmist describes for us is how forsakenness looks and feels in the life of the righteous. Dear friends, understanding this now can save us from terrible disillusionment later. Dale Ralph Davis suggests that "nothing panics the servant of God like the silence of God. Yahweh is the God who hears prayer (Ps.65:2), but what are we to think when He doesn't?"² Here David tells us that forsakenness consists of:

1. Times of silence (vv.1-3)

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?
Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning.
²O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer;
And by night, but I have no rest.

Explanation: David's cry emerges when his experience is at odds with his theology. Has this ever been true of you? Where your experience said one thing and your theology said another. His theology said, "*God is with His covenant people and those who trust Him will be delivered,*" but no deliverance came in David's situation. We don't know the specific circumstance which leaves a blank for us to fill in whatever issue we face.

David feels totally abandoned. The word "**forsaken**" (*azabtani*) is in the perfect tense which reveals that he feels God has *completely* and finally cut him off! Literally, the first two verses read,

*Why have You forsaken me?
Why are You so far from my deliverance?
Why are You so far from the words of my groaning?*

The problem was NOT ONLY GOD'S SILENCE, but also GOD'S seeming ABSENCE in his greatest hour of need. Verse 2, "*O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer. And by night, but I have no rest.*"

² Dale Ralph Davis, *Slogging Along in the Path of Righteousness: Psalm 13-24*, p.150

When God does not reply to him, it is not because He is *unable* to speak. God is *aware*, and God could answer, but He does not (*Is.45:15*). And this seems to fuel David's confusion and dismay. David seems to say, "Can't you see me here God? Will you not hear me God? I am groaning, roaring as it were, for all to hear...I am crying out to You...day and night...I am not silent, but You are!"

Now we know this goes far beyond David and has a double fulfillment, because both Matthew and Mark record this cry of anguish in the mouth of our Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34. When David utters these words, he *feels* something that he does not *understand*. When Christ utters them, He *understands* something He has never *felt*.

Looking past David, we see Jesus on the cross. Christ quoted these exact words in the ninth hour of the day (3:00 pm) at the end of the three-hour period of darkness (*Matt.27:46*). The cry from King David and King Jesus is not an accusing cry, it is not broken confidence, it is not a lapse of faith, but it is *a deep cry of anguish coming from the innermost part of His being*. It is as if both David and his greater Son, our Lord, confess in anguish, "*You have forsaken me, but I have not forsaken You.*"

Now, this is significant from the lips of Christ because if Jesus had forsaken God in bitterness, doubt, and unbelief in those last moments on the cross, He could not be our Savior. He would have become a sinner. But He did not fail (*Heb.4:15; 2 Cor.5:21*). He did not sin. To the very last moment Jesus trusts in His Father's providence, and after three hours of supernatural darkness which covered the world, Jesus is pained by the silence of God which He had never known from all eternity, and He cries out, "*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*"

He is feeling the separation of sin being poured on Him and the silence of heaven. There is no lapse of faith, just disorientation, but He cries, "*You are still My God, and I still trust in You. You are My Father in heaven although You have turned Your back on Me.*"

Exhortation: Forsakenness consists of *times of silence when your experience will be at odds with your theology. And the question is, when belief and experience collide, what do you do?*

What did David do? What did Jesus do? Jesus deals with the disorientation in circumstance by reaffirming God's character.

³ Yet You are holy,
O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel.

For us, this is one of the strongest pillars on which to strengthen your faith in any storm or trial. God is majestic in holiness (*Ex.15:11*). Holiness decks His house (*Ps.93:5*). Those entering the kingdom are on the highway of holiness (*Is.35:8*). He disciplines us that we might share in His holiness (*Heb.12:10*). Babbie Mason wrote about it as she sang.

God is too wise to be mistaken
God is too good to be unkind
So when you don't understand
When don't see His plan
When you can't trace His hand

Trust His Heart
Trust His Heart³

2. Feelings of absence (vv.4-5)

In verse 4, David not only looks to *God's character*, but he also reaches back to remember *God's faithfulness* in the past, and how trust was rewarded when God delivered his forefathers.

⁴ In You our fathers trusted;
They trusted and You delivered them.

⁵ To You they cried out and were delivered;
In You they trusted and were not disappointed.

Explanation: God has never forsaken His people because He is faithful, and He will not forsake His Son ultimately. But here in this moment of disorientation, in the feelings of absence that flood his soul, David looks back and says, "God, You not only *heard* them, but you *acted*. I don't understand! I am trusting the same way they did. Why your silence? Why Your absence? If the question is not of God's faithfulness, is it of my unworthiness?"

Now, there is no record of Jesus uttering these words on the cross, but they could have been in His mind, yet they don't need to appear in both places to be relevant to us. Three times in verses 4-5, the word "**trust**" (*batah*) is used as if to signal to us: this is what trust looks like in the life of the righteous.

Exhortation: The principle this offers to us who believe is this: the way trust walks when you're weary, when there is no apparent resolution, when there is no explanation for what is happening to you, before you fall into the sin of doubting God, call to the forefront of your mind, what you know to be true, although you don't feel it. *God's character is holy. God's faithfulness is sure.* Reaffirm who God is and what He has done. Trust like this is never disappointed (*Rom.5:5; 10:11*).

How does forsakenness look? It looks like *times of silence* and *feelings of absence*.

3. Acts of indifference (vv.6-11)

Here David's situation *feels* even more desperate than that of his ancestors, and yet Yahweh does nothing. He feels reduced and degraded below the status of a human being. Yet we look beyond David and discover what Christ felt like on the cross.

⁶ But I am a worm and not a man,
A reproach of men and despised by the people.

A worm, not a man, a reproach, despised. This is consistent with what Isaiah said.

- **Isaiah 52:14**—Just as many were astonished at you, *My people*,
So His appearance was marred more than any man
And His form more than the sons of men.

³ Babbie Mason, *Trust His Heart*

- **Isaiah 53:2**—He has no *stately* form or majesty
That we should look upon Him,
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.

This speaks directly of Christ—who was beaten raw and crippled in His body. They crushed a crown of thorns into His face, and on top of that, the spit, slaps, and plucking out of His beard left His face a mass of blood. He was despised and rejected.

The “**worm**” (*tolath*) is a destructive creature mentioned in agricultural contexts, but here it is simply a creature of the ground—helpless, frail, unwanted, and undesirable.

Jesus is not speaking of His *nature* or *character* when He says this. He is NOT saying, “I am less than human and worthless. God must hate Me.” He is speaking of His *condition*. He is saying, “I am helpless like a worm.” Abandoned by God, rejected by men. He is as weak and helpless as a worm in His humanity.

⁷ All who see me sneer at me;
They separate with the lip, they wag the head, saying,
⁸ “Commit yourself to the Lord; let Him deliver him;
Let Him rescue him, because He delights in him.”

Friends, you cannot make this stuff up! A thousand years before the events of the cross, here is a prophecy of the scorn and the ill-treatment which Jesus suffered at the hands of Satanic and religious men. In the gospels, they speak the very words that are prophesied—detailed, specific prophecy!

- In Matthew 27:28-31, we hear *the scorn He tolerated*.
- In Matthew 27:35-40, we see *the shame He suffered*.
- In Matthew 27:41-44, we witness *the slander He endured*.

The forsakenness reaches its most appalling level. Isaiah speaks of this same level of scorn when he writes,

- **Isaiah 53:3-4**—He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.
⁴ Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.

What is happening here? He came into the world that He had made, and the world would have nothing to do with Him (*John 1:12*). His disciples all fled, and Jesus stood there all alone experiencing the loathing, the hatred, the spite, the scorn, and the mocking of the very people that He had made.

The torture was *so deep, so painful, and so awful* that Jesus could not feel what He knew. He felt the wrath of God directed against sinners, bundled against one Man, in His body on the tree (*Gal.3:13*). He felt the scorn of the people slicing Him like razors all over His blessed face. He felt the nails and the lacerations of the whip. He felt the excruciating thirst, sore muscles, and dislocated bones.

The Holy One is now being subjugated to the awful depravity and scorn of sinful men. So much so that He feels like "a worm and not a man, a reproach of men and despised by the people."

Look at Him! Lifted up like a contemptible worm covered with the filth of man's sin. All abandoned Him.

Exhortation: What this means for us here is exactly what He told us Himself. "A slave is not greater than his master..." (John 15:20). Whatever He experienced for us, to a lesser degree, *we will experience for Him*. If He was despised, we will be *despised*. If He was a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief, despised, and forsaken, then there will be times in our lives when we will be *despised, forsaken, and acquainted with grief*. During these times, we will need comfort. We will need assurance. But all that we will get from some people is scorn and rejection. What are we to do?

- Reaffirm *God's character*—He is holy.
- Reaffirm *God's faithfulness*—He is trustworthy.
- Reaffirm *God's sovereignty*—He is in control.

Jesus goes back and remembers that it was the Father who brought Him into this.

⁹ Yet You are He who brought me forth from the womb;
You made me trust when upon my mother's breasts.

¹⁰ Upon You I was cast from birth;
You have been my God from my mother's womb.

¹¹ Be not far from me, for trouble is near;
For there is none to help.

Jesus is an example to us in His suffering of what we should do when we are suffering *times of silence* and *feeling of desertion*. Jesus drew upon His knowledge to strengthen His feelings. He *knew*, but He did not *feel* what He knew.

Jesus meditated on *God's faithfulness to others*, and now He meditated on *God's faithfulness to Him*. He thinks about the virgin birth, "**Yet You are He who brought me forth from the womb, You made me trust when upon my mother's breasts.**" It was God who prepared a body for Him, as Hebrews 10:5 indicates. The intensity increases. From conception and throughout My life, you have been My help. "**Be not far from me, for trouble is near; for there is none to help.**" All the disciples were gone. None could help but the Father alone (Cf. Job 10:8-12; Matt.26:56).

But for now...the heavens are bronze. For now, Jesus must endure the separation that we ourselves deserve. He is feeling the full effects of being our sin-bearer.

There is a four-fold feeling of forsakenness. First, *times of silence*. Second, *feelings of absence*. Third, *acts of indifference*, and fourth,

4. Dominance of enemies (vv.12-18)

As the lament of Christ continues, Jesus is aware that He is "surrounded, encircled, and encompassed" (vv.12, 16) by enemies.

¹² Many bulls have surrounded me;

Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled me.
¹³ They open wide their mouth at me,
As a ravening and a roaring lion.

His experience makes Him feel *trapped*. The words evoke this abject terror of one who is *powerless* with no avenue of escape. Those who look upon His miserable estate are metaphorically seen as **bulls of Bashan** (*which produced the fattest and largest cattle in the territory*), hungry, **ravening lions** ready for supper, and like mangy, half-wild, garbage-mooching, diseasing carrying **dogs**, sniffing about Him for something to eat.

All these enemies are meant to convey to us that in His *forsakenness*, He is surrounded by enemies and *devoid of comfort*. This is truly the serpent bruising His heel as prophesied in Genesis 3.

¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
And all my bones are out of joint;
My heart is like wax;
It is melted within me.

The assault upon Christ was so gruesome, and the ordeal was so overwhelming that He is *exhausted* and *emaciated*. All the fluids of His body are drying up and ceasing to function due to the wounds of crucifixion. The method of crucifixion was so designed that death would delay until maximum torture had been inflicted.

¹⁵ My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
And my tongue cleaves to my jaws;
And You lay me in the dust of death.

Though His body is drying up, splintered and crinkled up like a fragile piece of broken clay, the thirst signals that death is near—but He recognizes that **"You lay me in the dust of death."**

¹⁶ For dogs have surrounded me;
A band of evildoers has encompassed me;
They pierced my hands and my feet.
¹⁷ I can count all my bones.
They look, they stare at me;
¹⁸ They divide my garments among them,
And for my clothing they cast lots.

He is totally *humiliated*. All hell, as it were, was gathered around that cross. He is aware of the *shame* and *indignity* because His nakedness is exposed before *the beast-like mob*, His *mother*, and the other *women*. He is *hated*. He is *hunted*. He is *hammered*. He is *humiliated*.

But look again, please don't turn away! What does He do? The prayer comes to a climax.

¹⁹ But You, O Lord, be not far off;
O You my help, hasten to my assistance.
²⁰ Deliver my soul from the sword,
My only life from the power of the dog.
²¹ Save me from the lion's mouth;
From the horns of the wild oxen You answer me.

"O You my help...Deliver my soul...Save me...You answer Me!" He still *trusts* and expects deliverance. This is our Savior. This is our Champion. This is God's Suffering Servant.

Conclusion:

What are we to take-away from this amazing insider prophetic look at the Cross, a thousand years before it took place?

One takeaway must be, oh how He loves you and me. As the Author and perfecter of faith, Jesus shows us how deep the Father's love for us—Why would you neglect or reject a love so amazing and divine?

Another takeaway would be...God can be trusted. How do you respond to the apparent *silence and absence of God*, and the indifference and dominance of enemies?

- *God's character, faithfulness, and sovereignty can be trusted when He seems most distant.*

The faith modeled by Jesus on the cross was no superficial, second-hand, fair-weather faith that only trusted when it was good. He experienced the worst the world had to offer, knew what it was to feel abandoned by God—and He was able to surrender His spirit into the hand of God the Father—so can you.

It was probably the greatest hymn that Isaac Watts wrote. As he contemplated the sufferings of Christ, he asked,

Alas! and did my Savior bleed
And did my Sov'reign die?
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I?
Was it for crimes that I had done
He groaned upon the tree?

He concluded,

Amazing pity! grace unknown!
And love beyond degree!
Well might the sun in darkness hide
And shut his glories in,
When Christ, the mighty Maker died,
For man the creature's sin.

Thus might I hide my blushing face
while his dear cross appears;
dissolve my heart in thankfulness,
and melt mine eyes to tears.

But drops of tears can ne'er repay
the debt of love I owe.
Here, Lord, I give myself away;
'tis all that I can do.⁴

John Newton (1725-1807) is famous for writing *Amazing Grace*, the world's most famous hymn. He also composed several less famous yet equally beautiful hymns. Before his conversion, he was a notorious sailor

⁴ Isaac Watts, *Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed?*

who was abused and mistreated. He later became a slavery trader, before a life-changing event took place in his career. He wrote of it in this hymn.

In evil long I took delight,
Unawed by shame or fear;
'Till a new object struck my sight,
And stopped my wild career.

I saw One hanging on a tree,
In agonies and blood;
Who fixed His languid eyes on me,
As near his cross I stood.

Sure, never to my latest breath
Can I forget that look:
It seemed to charge me with His death,
Though not a word He spoke.

My conscience felt and owned the guilt,
And plunged me in despair;
I saw my sins His blood had spilt,
And helped to nail Him there.

Alas, I knew not what I did,
But now my tears are vain:
Where shall my trembling soul be hid?
For I, the Lord have slain.

A second look He gave, which said,
"I freely all forgive;
This blood is for thy ransom paid;
I'll die that thou mayest live."

Thus, while His death my sin displays
In all its blackest hue,
Such is the mystery of grace
It seals my pardon too.

With pleasing grief and mournful joy,
My spirit now is filled,
That I should such a life destroy,
Yet live by Him I killed.⁵

⁵ John Newton, *In Evil Long I Took Delight*

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