

WITH CHRIST ON THE CROSS

Psalm 22

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Today, since it is Palm Sunday and communion Sunday I share the Lord's prayer He prayed on the cross, Psalm 22. You recall from the Gospel account that it was the third hour or 9:00 in the morning when Christ was nailed to the cross. At the sixth hour or at noon there was darkness over the face of the whole land, until the ninth hour or 3:00 in the afternoon. His experience of six hours on the cross was nearly complete. The most unimaginable physical pain as well as the terrible deep and dark agony of His spirit as He becomes separated from God for our sake. That time is now drawing to an end. As darkness is over the face of the whole land, Jesus cries out with a loud voice "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1, NIV).

This word which Jesus speaks from the cross, from Psalm 22, is known as His fourth word from the cross. The first word was "Father, forgive them." The last word was "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit." The fourth word, the central word, is again a prayer to His Father, "My God, my God."

Thus at the beginning of Christ's experience on the cross He's praying. At the end of His experience He's praying. In the middle of His experience, He's praying.

No matter what has happened to Him—the alienation, the separation He experienced from God, He has not lost His faith or trust in the God who calls Him from His eternal presence with the Father into the trials of life. God has yet been with Him and He confesses the Lord.

I think we err if we consider that fourth word from the cross "My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken Me?" only a broken fragment of a sentence. It fits within the larger context of the entire twenty-second Psalm. It appears in the recitation of that word that Jesus is telling us that

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although He does not have strength to recite now this twenty-second Psalm in its entirety, this is where His thoughts have been. Especially in these last hours He has been silent on the cross, when darkness has ascended. He has been praying through this special psalm that His forefather David placed there uniquely for the Messiah to pray. At that one moment in all eternity when the very Son of God would be crucified on the cross, this is His psalm. The psalm begins by relating His experience. He is alone and there seems to be with that aloneness the silence of God “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent” (Psalm 22:1–2, NIV). He has said just hours before in the Upper Room that all would forsake Him and leave. But the Father was with Him and would never forsake Him or leave Him alone.

Now in His experience He finds Himself very much alone. He has been answered very dramatically by prayer before when He stood by the open grave of Lazarus. And He confessed in that moment, “I know that thou hearest Me always” (John 11:42). But now He is saying that He cried and there is no answer. And that night He had found no rest.

What He has confessed earlier seems now to be so contradicted by His experience. On the cross He’s really alone. Abandoned for those moments by God. He becomes sin, who knew no sin, while He becomes separated from God on our behalf. The mystery we can scarcely take in or understand. But it’s striking to watch how the Lord prays in this psalm because He alternates between His experience and what is objectively real, independently true regardless of what He’s experiencing.

It’s this kind of way we’re to also pray. Something we see continually in Romans. Our experience must ever be judged by the reality of God’s Word, which has already been delivered

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to us. Jesus leads in verse 3 from His experience into a moment of prayer with the Father. “Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel” (NIV). That is, God takes up His residence where His people praise Him. If we want the presence of God to be among us in our life then open our hearts and our lips in praise and there He is. Enthroned on our praises.

“In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed” (Psalm 22:4–5, NIV). In this moment Jesus is historically reflecting the fact that the people of God had always been delivered by God. This is grounds for hope. God was active in the past. He will act now for Him as well. Rather than caving in to His experience and accusing God of never being able to come to His rescue, Jesus shores up His faith with that quotation of the real word which is objectively true regardless of His experience. God has helped His people in the past.

Something we are always to keep in mind in regard to our praying as we pass through crucibles in our own experience: that we are to relate to our crucible the unchanging Word of God, which tells us that God is faithful to His people and He delivers.

In verse 6 Jesus comes back to again relate His experience. Especially the sting of that experience because in that moment when He hangs upon the cross He seems to be such a false representative of God. It had been written of Him, “Zeal for Thy house shall consume Me” (Psalm 69:9). He had been zealous for the name, for the character, for the reputation of God. Just hours earlier He had prayed to the Father saying, “I have glorified you” (John 17:4). Now it seems like the God whom He represented is so very much in reproach. It is the sting added to His suffering. “I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: ‘He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue

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him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him” (Psalm 22:6–8, NIV). There is the taunt to His faith on the cross.

But as this taunt is delivered that God is not going to come through for you, Jesus once again in prayer for the second time returns to the objective reality, not in His experience that He’s having now on the cross. But to the fact that God indeed has come through for Him in the past. Now it’s no longer God coming through for other people in past ages; it’s “God has come through for Me before I’ve had this experience of the cross.”

“Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast” (Psalm 22:9, NIV). Here we have to make reference to Herod’s slaughter of the children of Bethlehem and the flight of the Christ child into Egypt to recall what Jesus is meaning with these words. “From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help” (verses 10–11, NIV).

Having prayed that prayer then Jesus lapses for the third time into describing His own experience. It is an experience of sheer terror that He faces on the cross. “Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me” (verse 12, NIV). Bashan is the particular area of the country that the heftiest and most well-fed cattle were. Here inescapably He hangs on the cross. About Him now as His eyes blur out to the crowd He sees in fact the wild, charging, turbulent, sinful human nature that comes against Him. Perhaps He even looks beyond that and sees demonic hosts through the eye of the Spirit, which are triumphing in His crucifixion. He says in that moment there is terror for Him. “Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me” (verse 13, NIV). That describes what He’s feeling like physically. “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint” (verse 14, NIV). As indeed they would be with the

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body distended in its hanging position on the cross. “My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd” (verses 14–15, NIV).

A potter’s shard was a little leftover from a vessel when the potter would make a vessel and put it in the kiln. It would have a base on it. When the vessel had been completely fired and it was being withdrawn from the kiln or the oven, there would be a stick that would knock at the base and knock off the extraneous clay which was at the base so the vessel could come out formed. This piece was called the potter’s shard. It fell to the bottom of the kiln and it stayed there as other vessels day after day were put into the kiln and fired. The kiln after being fired again and again would finally one day be cleaned. And when it was totally clean, all of the shards would be taken out. Job used one of these to scratch himself of boils. Other people took them and used them for writing tablets.

They represent the fact that more than a normal vessel of clay which is baked and the moisture withdrawn, this vessel of clay had truly had all its moisture taken from it. It is completely dry. It is exhausted in the process of being fired. So our Lord himself is described as having strength which is totally dried up. His tongue cleaves to His jaws. “My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs have surrounded me” (verses 15–16, NIV). Here we see not household pets but vicious dogs who have treed their quarry. And who are baying at the foot of the cross against Him. “A band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing” (verses 16–18, NIV). What a striking psalm. A psalm written eight hundred years before His experience on the cross. The psalm is so remarkably accurate in its prediction.

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For the third time now the Lord comes to pray. To contrast His experience with the ultimate reality of God's presence. "But you, O LORD, be not far off; O my Strength, come quickly to help me. Deliver my life from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs. Rescue me from the mouth of the lions; save me from the horns of the wild oxen" (verses 19–21, NIV). Here we almost have the imagery of the oxen with its two horns coming against Jesus and the nails representing the two horns. He is impaled to the cross. Evil is personified in the word "oxen."

That is His prayer. And with that He dies. That is His psalm from the Cross. The psalm does not end there. The rest of it is meant to be sung on Easter morning. Three days later when He has risen from the tomb. From there the song, having been stilled momentarily, picks up again and we find now not a mood of suffering and a mood of being forsaken. Rather now a mood of expectancy, of triumph, of God's approving Him and blessing Him and declaring His Father's name to all the world. "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you" (verse 22, NIV).

The first thing Jesus does after His resurrection is He begins to appear to those who have been truly His sisters and brothers, to declare to them what God has done to Him in raising Him from the dead. "You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob [which you are spiritually if you belong to Christ], honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one [Jesus]" (verses 23–24, NIV). God has not hid His face from Jesus but has heard when He cried to Him. The cry on the cross "My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken Me?" has now been answered. In an ultimate sense He now is not forsaken. He is gathered. He is raised. He is to forever be present with the Father, never for a moment for the rest of eternity to be separated from His presence. And we who are

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crucified with Christ, who have died with Him, also are never for a moment of eternity again to be separated from Him.

So the Lord cries out. “From you [from God] comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you will I fulfill my vows. The poor will eat and be satisfied” (verses 25–26, NIV). Here the Lord makes reference to a particular form of sacrifice in the Old Testament called the peace offering which one gave when he completed his mission and rendered thanksgiving to God for the successful completion of that mission. When the peace offering was given then the meat could be taken and eaten by the person who offered it as well as shared by that person with all his friends and whoever he wanted to share it with. Jesus is saying that His mission in life is accomplished. He has won a victory. And He shares in the benefits of that victory with all now. He shared with the afflicted or with the poor. He shares the benefits of His victory with all those who seek the Lord. The benefits of His victory are life, life everlasting, forgiveness of sin, the defeat of the enemy Satan. These benefits He shares with His people. “May your hearts live forever!” (verse 26, NIV).

Then the Lord goes on to indicate that this crucifixion and resurrection is not some small historical footnote which will be found in some obscure place in history by later generations. It will be an event, which continues to gather and gather and fill up history until all persons recognize that the most monumental event in the history of the human race is the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations. All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—those who cannot keep themselves alive [me and you]. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness to

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a people yet unborn—for he has done it” (verses 27–31, NIV). Or that “He has wrought it.” The Lord anticipates our presence two thousand years later in this psalm. His deliverance will be proclaimed to a generation yet unborn.

Christ cries that word from the cross, “My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken Me?” We must understand it from two vantage points. In that moment He truly is forsaken of God and alone—physically and spiritually suffering on the cross. But we must also understand that it is but the beginning of an entire psalm, which is in Christ’s heart as He is crucified. It is psalm of the Savior through which He recognizes that the outcome is a positive outcome, a triumphant outcome. It is one which does not end in the grave but ends instead in resurrection, triumph and exaltation.

We now share through the act of communion in remembering Christ’s passion. His life given for us.