

Truth for Today

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Speaker: Mr. Ernie Brown

Love, Faith and Hope in the Psalms: Psalm 22 - Love

The Tabernacle system is described mainly in the Books of Exodus and Leviticus. It was designed and made to remind Israel that it was always God's desire and plan to dwell amongst His people. In that system, the ultimate experience for any man was to be permitted to enter the innermost chamber of the Tabernacle. This was called The Most Holy Place, or The Holy of Holies. Even then, that privilege was only enjoyed by one man, the High Priest, and that only once a year, on the Great Day of Atonement, as outlined in Leviticus 16.

For very good reason, Psalm 22 has been called the Holy of Holies of the Bible. We Christians can, of course, draw near into the very presence of God at any time, and at all times. We can do so only because the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son, has cleansed us from all sin. It has made the way into the very presence of God accessible to the simplest believer on the Lord Jesus Christ. When we read Psalm 22, we are on exceedingly holy ground. Let us first of all examine it in its own setting.

In general, the Psalms tell us about the feelings of godly men, as they went through a variety of experiences in company with their God. This is particularly true of those Psalms we call the Messianic Psalms. These tell us in a very special way what it felt like for the Lord Jesus to undergo various kinds of testing, during His life upon earth.

The first section of Psalms, 1-41, describe mainly the kind of man that pleases God. In the middle of this set of Psalms, we have a trilogy of Psalms, 22, 23 and 24. They tell us about how the Lord Jesus personally pleased God in a very special way. It will not be my privilege to talk with you about Psalms 23 and 24, but I owe it to you to outline some of the sweet connections between them as a set.

A figure included in scripture from the very beginning of the Bible is that of a shepherd, well known as one who provides infinite care for his sheep. It is no accident that, more often than not, when God singled out men to look after his people on earth, the men he selected had been trained as shepherds. Indeed, they had proved themselves to be worthy of that vocation. Building on this, we are told in scripture of three particular ways in which the Lord Jesus exercises His shepherdly care towards His own. John 10:11 records the words of the Lord Jesus, "I am the Good Shepherd Who giveth His life for the sheep." Hebrews 13:20 speaks about the Great Shepherd of the sheep, alive from among the dead, Who provides constant care for His people while they are still living on earth. Then, in 1 Peter 5:4, we are told, "When the Chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that will not fade away".

These three aspects of the Lord's shepherdly care for His own fit in very well with Psalms 22, 23, and 24. Psalm 22 tells us about the Lord's deepest feelings when, as The Good Shepherd, He gave His life at Calvary for His sheep. At the present time, His constant care is described wonderfully well in Psalm 23 as The Great Shepherd, alive from among the dead, caring for His sheep, day by day. As to the future, as The Chief Shepherd, He will dispense suitable rewards to those who have been true to Him in His absence. As what we might call under-shepherds, they will have cared for His beloved sheep on His behalf while they wait for Him to come.

We can say that:

In Psalm 22 we have The Cross.

In Psalm 23 we have The Crook (the shepherd's crook that is).

In Psalm 24 we have The Crown.

Others might well say that:

In Psalm 22, we are provided with a Substitute,

In Psalm 23 with a Shepherd and

In Psalm 24 with a Sceptre.

The outstanding moral feature exhibited:

In Psalm 22 is love,
In Psalm 23 faith, and
In Psalm 24 hope.

Of course, there is no end to the alliteration we can use to connect the group together, but these will suffice for today. While we speak of such things, why not try to prepare your own way of connecting the teaching of the three Psalms? After meditating on them, ask the Lord to give you the right words to sum up the main lessons you have learned from them? What you learn as a result of your own prayerful meditations, expressed in your own words, natural to your own vocabulary, will prove to be far more valuable to you than anything you hear from anyone else.

The three Psalms are also connected together by the fact that Psalm 22 begins with a cry of anguish; Psalm 24 ends with a cry of triumph. To get nearer to today's Psalm, Psalm 22 is a solemn meditation on the sufferings of Christ; Psalm 24 is a joyous celebration of the glory of Christ.

Now, then, Psalm 22. Fundamentally, it tells us what it felt like for the Lord Jesus to die on account of sin. It cannot be applied in a general way. Other Psalms might have several valid applications. Psalm 22 is unique. It can only be understood properly as an outline of the unique sufferings of Christ when He died on the cross. He did so to answer to the claims of a Holy God, Who has been outraged by sin, sins and sinners. Because of this, Psalm 22 is rightly said to be The Psalm of the Sin Offering. With all the major Offerings, we have a group of scriptures which detail the various aspects of the truth involved. Thus, the instruction for the Details of the Offerings are found in the Book of Leviticus, in this case chapter 4 for The Sin Offering. Later verses in the same Book, in our case 6:24-30, outline how the sacrifice had to be actually offered. This is called The Law of the Sin Offering. Then, in the Psalms, we have a record of the personal feelings of the Lord Jesus as being offered in line with that particular Offering. Our Psalm 22 is the case in point for The Sin Offering. Then, we get in the Gospels the historical facts as to how the Lord did actually suffer in this way. Many see in Mark's Gospel a particular emphasis which highlights the features of the Sin Offering. After that, in the New Testament Epistles, we get the plain teaching about the significance and effective result of the Lord Jesus suffering in this way.

It is surely an amazing privilege that in the Psalms, and Psalm 22 in particular, the veil is drawn aside. We hear what it felt like for the Lord to be made a sacrifice for sin on our account. Surely, here we are indeed on holy ground.

In meditating on the Lord's sufferings we do well to look for the distinction between what He suffered at the hands of men, and what He suffered at the hands of God. He suffered from God, on account of sin, that God might show mercy to men and that blessing might be made available to men. He, Jesus Christ the Righteous Man, suffered from unrighteous men because He was righteous. God will eventually act in righteous judgment upon all such unrighteous men.

I trust that these general comments will be helpful as we set the detail against them. Let me suggest the following framework.

The heading – Aijelet Shahaar – means 'the hind of the morning'. What a picture! A new day is to dawn on the world; a time of peace, plenty and prosperity. It can only come in on the basis of the value to God of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It will commence when the Lord Jesus Himself will appear in power and great glory, and initiate His Kingdom, Himself being King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Overall, then, the Psalm tells us about the sufferings of Christ on the Cross, and the very important sequel to that suffering.

In verses 1-6, the Lord is seen as completely alone, but quietly submissive to the way in which His unique, perfect life on earth would be brought to such a cruel, shameful end. We hear the terrible cry of abandonment, wrung from the Lord's lips at the very climax of His sufferings. In verses 7-11, we see him mocked, but unshaken in His resolute trust in God alone, while feeling most keenly the terrible abandonment. In verses 12-21, He is seen to be surrounded by His enemies. In verses 12-15, it is the opposition of the Jewish leaders in particular. Then, verses 16-18 have in view the responsibility of the Gentile powers, specifically Rome, I suppose, at that time.

In verses 14-17, we are given a very vivid description of death by crucifixion. It is necessary to bear in mind that while men did the actual deeds, God was using the circumstances of the activities of men to bring about the accomplishment of His own will. He was exacting his own judgment on sin in the willing sacrifice of His own well-beloved Son. As Joseph said to his brethren in his day, "Ye thought evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). In preaching to Jews out of every nation on the Day of Pentecost, Peter said of Jesus, "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain." Verses 19-20 record, in advance of the fulfilment of the Psalm at the Cross, the final cry of anguish and the dramatic cry for deliverance in verse 21, "Save Me from the lion's mouth".

In 1 Peter 1:11, Peter refers to the sufferings of the Christ, and the glory that should follow. Here, in Psalm 22, the first 21 verses give us an outline of the sufferings of Christ. Verses 22 to 31 assure us of the glory that should rightly follow. 'Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning' (Psalm 30:5).

The first circle of blessing alluded to is the Christian church. The prophecy in verse 22, "I will declare Thy name to My brethren", was fulfilled when The Lord commissioned Mary Magdalene, in John 20:17, "Go and tell My brethren, and say unto them, I ascend to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God." The second part of the promise, "In the midst of the assembly will I sing praises unto Thee", is recorded in Hebrews 2:12 as fulfilled in the assembly, the Christian church.

In verses 23-26, national blessing for Israel is predicted. Verses 27-31 show us that Gentile Nations will also share in the celebration of the mighty victory secured by the value to God of the death of Christ.

Let us now comb through the Psalm again, noticing some of the more outstanding detail.

With what an earth-shaking exclamation the Psalm begins! "My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken Me?" There had been many of the Lord's servants who in their day had been inclined to feel deserted by their God when they felt in greatest need of help and support. Their cries of distress were never raised in vain. Their God came in for them in a very wonderful way, time and time again. But now, the One Who had always been far more faithful to His God than any other Servant could ever be, was crying in deepest distress. Yet, no answering cry of comfort or support could be heard by Him. His sense of isolation was total and complete. Why? Verse 3 gives the plain answer. God is a holy God. The only answer possible to sin is to apply the righteous judgment of a holy God. As the only possible perfect sacrifice for sin the Lord Jesus must bear the huge burden completely alone.

The derision suggested in verses 7-11 is a very accurate prophecy of the ridicule heaped upon the Lord Jesus in the hours leading up to and at the Cross. How little the rabble of the day would realise how accurately they themselves were fulfilling scripture! The religious leaders of the Jews should have known better. But, here they were, fulfilling, to the letter, everything that both condemned them, and showed the true worth of the Lord Jesus. He willingly suffered such abuse, so that by His death He might deliver from their sins and from the fear of death, any who trusted Him as Saviour.

The very words themselves give a remarkably accurate description of death by crucifixion. More so when we consider that crucifixion was not the mode of judicial execution common among the Jews when the Psalm was written. And that was done almost a thousand years before the Lord Jesus was born into the world!

If I might pause to think of one detail, let me think through verse 14. "I am poured out like water. All my bones are out of joint. My heart is melted in the midst of my bowels." Man is a tripartite being, spirit, and soul, and body. Man as a race, and every one of us as individuals, has sinned. We have offended God in every part of our being, spirit and soul and body. To be an adequate substitute, the Lord Jesus had to become, and is, fully man, in spirit and soul and body. As the one sacrifice for sin, to give due answer to God for every sin and every sinner, it was necessary for Him to suffer in every part of His holy being, spirit and soul and body. This comes out in this very verse. "I am poured out like wax." His suffering caused Him to be absolutely drained, intellectually. This is a function of the personal spirit. Also, "My bones are out of joint." This clearly refers to the physical members of the body. "My heart is melted in the midst of My bowels." Matters in relation to the soul are very often, as here, related to the heart. It is a solemn reminder that we have sinned against a holy God with every part of our being, spirit, and soul, and body. It was absolutely essential, then, that the Lord Jesus should suffer likewise in every part of His being, spirit, and soul, and body. The infinite accuracy of scripture is a joy and a wonder to behold.

The individual beasts referred to in verses 12-21 portray the vicious character of particular enemies who arrayed themselves against the Lord Jesus in the hours before and during the crucifixion. They will yet have to give answer personally to Him for their inveterate opposition to Him and hatred of Him in His day of greatest need.

Verses 19-21 give us the mighty cry for deliverance, at the very point of death. "Save me from the lion's mouth." Immediately there is the joy of deliverance from that death. "Thou hast heard me." In John 12:27-28, we get the anticipation of the dramatic fulfilment of that cry. "Father save me from this hour; but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father glorify thy name." Then there came a voice from heaven, "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." Those words in John 12 were, of course, spoken anticipatively of His solemn death and glorious resurrection. And, when the time came, why was an immediate answer given? Because the work was completed! Indeed, I understand that the cry in John 19:30, usually quoted as, "It is finished", is really only one word of victorious acclamation, "Accomplished!"

What a wonderful end to a truly remarkable Psalm. "He hath done this". His wonderful love, expressed in such supreme suffering, has made a righteous basis for all the blessing that shall ever be enjoyed in whatever sphere. He personally shall control for God all the justice that shall be administered, and dispense all the blessing that shall ever be enjoyed. And all because His devotion to God, and His wonderful love for sinful men, caused Him to be willing to suffer in such a terrible way! We shall for ever praise the blessed God that the fulfilment of all His mighty purpose, celebrated throughout the mighty universe of God, hangs completely on the work at Calvary of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. "He hath done this." And we don't need to wait till we get to heaven to join in the resounding chorus of celebration. Psalm 24 goes on to spell it out. But, even now, we can draw near to God and join in the singing led by the Lord Jesus, the true minister of the sanctuary of God. "He hath done this." Blessed be His precious Name! To Him be glory, honour and majesty, dominion and power, throughout all ages, world without end, forever and forever. Amen.

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