

Chapter 14

CHRIST ON THE CROSS

Psalm 22

A thousand years before Christ, David wrote this remarkable poem of suffering and praise, taken in part from his own experience, but then going far beyond anything which he could ever have known in his own limited understanding. The psalm constitutes a remarkable evidence of divine inspiration, as it outlines in minute prophetic detail the sufferings of Christ on the cross, as well as His victory over sin and the subsequent preaching of His gospel in all the world. As we shall see, there are aspects of the very structure of the psalm which still further confirm its divine inspiration.

The 22nd Psalm is quoted at least seven times in the New Testament, all in reference to Jesus Christ, so there is no doubt that it was understood by the Apostles as a Messianic psalm. It describes accurately the agony of death by crucifixion, in spite of the fact that this method of execution was virtually unknown at the time of David, especially among the Jews. The reader is given an insight, not only into the physical sufferings of Christ, but also into the very thoughts of His heart. It is almost as though we were there ourselves with the soldiers and Pharisees around

the cross, when "sitting down they watched Him there" (Matthew 27:36).

Forsaken by the Father

Verses 1-5

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?

O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent.

But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel.

Our fathers trusted in thee: they trusted, and thou didst deliver them.

They cried unto thee, and were delivered: they trusted in thee, and were not confounded.

The psalm begins with the awful cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (see Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). Of the famous "seven words from the cross," this cry is the central "word," and the central word in this central "word" is the most important question ever to be answered: "Why?"

Why, indeed, should the pure and spotless Lamb be impaled on a cross to die? The queries continue in His soul: "Why art thou so far from helping me [!], and from the words of my roaring?"

The Lord Jesus was not, of course, roaring on the cross. He was utterly silent and, in some translations, the scholars have thought it more appropriate to say He was "groaning." Nevertheless the Hebrew word really is "roaring," the same word as used for the roaring of a lion.

The clue to the answer to these questions is found later in the 32nd Psalm, written after David's sin in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah. There David wrote: "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long" (Psalm 32:3). David was silent on the outside, but "roaring" inwardly because of the pressing guilt of his sin. The soul of the Lord Jesus likewise was roaring inwardly, because of the guilt of the sins of the whole world, which He was bearing in His own body on the tree (I Peter 2:24). His Father had turned His back on Him, as it were, because He was "of purer eyes than to behold evil" or to "look on iniquity" (Habakkuk 1:13).

He, who had always been in perfect communion with His Father, now was separated from Him because of sin. This of course, is the essence of what hell will be (that is, complete separation from God). In those three terrible hours of darkness on the cross, Jesus Christ endured hell itself, in order to save sinners from the eternal separation from God (II Thessalonians 1:9) which they deserved.

Verse 2 of the psalm notes His suffering in the morning hours and then in "*the night season,*" when the sun was darkened supernaturally in mid-day. The answer to His own question is given in verse 3. "*Thou art holy.*" That is, the only possible reason that the Father could ever forsake His own beloved Son, is because He was made sin for us, and God's holiness requires that sin be judged.

And what a beautiful figure is Christ's testimony here (verse 3) of God's dwelling place, "*... inhabitest the praises of Israel!*" He who would one day become the heir of all God's promises to Israel, even now could recall all God's promises and deliverances for His people, and how He had never failed when they called on Him. Yet God would not hear *Him!*

The Scarlet Worm

Verse 6

But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people.

In verse 6, He is recorded to have said in His heart, "*But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people.*" In Isaiah 52:14, it would be said prophetically that "his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men: ..." That is, from the awful beatings He endured in connection with His trial and crucifixion, He no longer even looked like a man. Isaiah 53:3 said, "He is despised and rejected of men: ..."

These statements, however, hardly explain fully the identification of Himself as a worm. The key seems to lie in the recognition that this was a specific type of worm—the *scarlet worm*. As a matter of fact, the Hebrew word translated "worm" in this passage (*tolath*) is also frequently translated "scarlet" (e.g., Exodus 25:4) or "crimson" (Isaiah 1:18). The reason for this odd equivalence is because the scarlet worm was the source of a fluid from which the people of ancient times made their scarlet dyes.

Christ's portrayal of Himself as stained crimson on the cross thus immediately speaks to us in the words of Colossians 1:20. "Having made peace with the blood of His cross, by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself."

But no doubt the deeper significance of His identification of Himself as the Scarlet Worm lies in the remarkable life-death cycle of this unique animal. For when the mother worm of this species is ready to give birth to her baby worms, she will implant her body in a tree somewhere, or a post, or a stick of wood, so firmly that she can never leave again.

Then, when the young are brought forth, the mother's body provides protection and sustenance for her young until they reach the stage where they can leave home and fend for themselves. Then the mother dies. And as she dies, the scarlet fluid in her body emerges to stain her body and the bodies of her progeny and the wood of the tree where they were given life by their dying mother.

What a picture of the blood-stained cross, and how "it became Him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings" (Hebrews 2:10). Throughout the realm of the biological kingdom, new life is always preceded by a time of travail and possibly death, and this is always a divine portrait of bringing forth sons to spiritual life through spiritual death. Thus it is said prophetically of Christ, "He shall see of the travail of His soul and shall be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:11). Because of His death, not only are individual souls delivered unto everlasting life through a "new birth," but so, ultimately, "the creation itself will be delivered from the bondage of corruption" at the "manifestation of the sons of God" (Romans 8:19,21). The redemption price was great, but the result is endless joy and glory.

Principalities and Powers

Verses 7-13

All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying,

He trusted on the LORD that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him.

But thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts.

I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my mother's belly.

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

Many bulls have compassed me: strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round.

They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion.

Verses 7 through 21 of this 22nd Psalm comprise one of the most remarkable passages ever written, describing in intimate detail the events that would take place a thousand years later on Calvary. The events are told through the eyes and heart of the One hanging on the "Tree" planted there.

All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, He trusted on the Lord that He would deliver him: let Him deliver him, seeing He delighted in him.

Instead of compassion for the innocent victim and sorrow over His suffering, there is nothing but gloating and mocking. Listen to the record of its fulfillment: "And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, ... Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, he saved others; himself he cannot save, ... He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God" (Matthew 27:39, 41-43).

In the next two verses of the psalm, He recalls His unique conception and birth, when He entered the world in human flesh. "*Thou art He that took me out of the womb: Thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts.*" He had left His throne in heaven to take up residence in a body "prepared" for Him (Hebrews 10:5) in a virgin's womb, and He had been conscious of His Father's presence and fellowship even when in the embryonic and infant stages of the growth

of that body. Throughout His human pilgrimage, He knew that "he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him" (John 8:29). Yet, finally, here on the cross, He prays in anguish: "*Be not far from me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help.*" Even His Father had apparently forsaken Him. Trouble, indeed, was very near! A malevolent horde of the demonic hosts of darkness surrounded Him, invisible to human eyes but viciously real, anticipating imminent victory over their age-long Enemy. "This was their hour, and the power of darkness" (Luke 22:53). "That old Serpent" (Revelation 12:9) was inflicting his violent sting of death on the Seed of the Woman (Genesis 3:15), and like a rabid menagerie of wild animals, his demonic spirits were closing in for the kill. There were "*many bulls ... strong bulls of Bashan*" compassing Him. These wicked bull-spirits had long ago corrupted the Canaanites in the kingdom of Bashan, producing and possessing an evil race of giants (note Genesis 6:4; Deuteronomy 3:1-12), which had been destroyed by the Israelites through the strength of their God. There, also, He could see that "*dogs have compassed me*"—perhaps referring to the vicious demons controlling the Gentile soldiers who had so cruelly scourged and mocked Him (verse 16). "*Unicorns*" were there also (a term referring to the mighty *aurochs*, long extinct, but of unexcelled ferocity when living), aptly symbolizing the other fierce spirits hovering over Him (verse 21). Furthermore, there were "*ravening and roaring lions*"—including Satan himself (I Peter 5:8)—"*gaping upon Him with their mouths*" (verse 13), and seeking to devour Him.

"*The assembly of the wicked have enclosed me!*" That evil congregation dancing around their victim (apostate priests and brutal soldiers, jeering rabble and hordes of invisible demonic powers) little realized that they were only securing their own eternal doom. A great transaction was there being effected, planned long before the foundation of the world.

"Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, [He] took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; and having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it" (Colossians 2:14,15). "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same; that through death, He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Hebrews 2:14,15).

Though the Serpent had bruised His heel, He would crush the head of that wicked one, destroying him and all who followed him, whether man or angel, in everlasting fire (Matthew 25:41). The accomplishment of this great work, however, required that He must first satisfy the righteous justice of a holy God, in offering His own suffering and death in substitution for the deserved penalty of eternal death pronounced for the sins of the world. He must first "by the grace of God ... taste death for every man" (Hebrews 2:9)

The Agony of Crucifixion

Verses 14-18

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.

My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death.

For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.

I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me.

They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture.

In verses 14 through 18 of Psalm 22 are described prophetically, a thousand years in advance, the details of the physical sufferings and indignities that Christ must endure in His crucifixion. *"I am poured out like water—all my bones are out of joint—my heart is like wax—melted in the midst of my bowels,"* Suspended by spikes which *"pierced my hands and my feet,"* the unnatural strains forced His bones to tear out of their joints, the body to dehydrate, the heart eventually to collapse and rupture. Probably the most agonizingly painful form of execution ever invented by human cruelty, the hideous Cross will remain forever as the ultimate measure of man's wickedness and of God's love. Almost unnoticed as we view His awful sufferings is the remarkable evidence of divine inspiration which this psalm provides. The mathematical probability of David's being able to predict these events in such detail without the guidance of the Holy Spirit is, for all practical purposes, absolutely zero!

"My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws." Jesus had become like a desiccated piece of splintered clay, and the thirst was beyond imagination. Even the normal fluids of the mouth had dried away in the burning sun that had preceded the noonday darkness. *"Thou hast brought me into the dust of death."* Because of Adam's sin, all men must return to the dust, of course, but God had promised that the body of the second Adam would never see corruption (Psalm 16:10). He would enter and experience death, therefore, but its "dust" does not here refer to the destiny of His body. The term must refer rather to the enduring of every tiny element of suffering that anyone would ever have to endure.

The Climax of Suffering

Verses 19–21

But be not thou far from me, O LORD: O my strength, haste thee to help me.

Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog.

Save me from the lion's mouth: for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns.

To the physical agonies, of course, were added the mental humiliations. The first Adam had been provided a coat of skins to cover his nakedness (Genesis 3:21). The last Adam had every garment stripped from Him, as He hung suspended before the leers of the carnal and bestial mob around Him. *"I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me."*

The Scriptures mercifully spare both Him and us of any further chronicling of the obscene curses and physical torments inflicted on Him during the horrible hours on the cross. However, there is one remarkable incident which is mentioned. *"They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture"* (verse 18). This is almost the only specific event at the cross which is mentioned in all four of the Gospels (Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:23, 24). There must be a special reason why this one event is emphasized in this way.

So far as the record goes, these few items of clothing were the only personal possessions ever owned by the Lord Jesus Christ (Maker of heaven and earth!) during His life on earth. *"Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor"* (II Corinthians 8:9). Though He has been *"appointed heir of all things"* (Hebrews 1:2), the only inheritance He left at His death was the *"New Testament"* and its *"promise of eternal inheritance"* (Hebrews 9:15). And even His pitiful scraps of clothing were stolen and

appropriated by His executioners, not allowing even those to be given to His grieving mother. What He had taught by precept, He also taught by example: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth" (Matthew 6:19). No doubt, there will be great embarrassment when we enter one day into His presence, as He asks us concerning the possessions that we have left upon earth!

In verses 19, 20, and 21, we have the climax of His prayer, at the very peak of His suffering during the three hours of hell's darkness. In agony and urgency, He calls upon God to help Him before Satan's triumph is complete. He has endured all the sufferings of earth and hell, and it is unthinkable that the Son of God can die forever, with Satan usurping the throne of the universe.

"Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog." The word for "darling" is, in the Septuagint, translated *monogenes*—the same word as in John 3:16—"only begotten." The Father surely will not forever turn His back on His beloved Son, once the price for sin is paid. *"The power of the dog,"* in addition to its demonic implications, may also refer to leering Sodomites savouring the scene at the cross, for such were called "dogs" by God in the Mosaic laws (Deuteronomy 23:17,18).

"Save me from the lion's mouth ... from the horns of the unicorns." Satan, the roaring lion, is about to devour Him, and the mighty bulls to impale Him. But, then, the Father's silence finally is broken! *"thou hast heard me!"* (verse 21).

No more, from this verse on, is heard the roaring of the lions and the bellowing of the bulls, the barking dogs, or the hissing serpents, or the jeering and cursing of the bloodthirsty mob. The hour of darkness is past; the light has dawned. Satan is a defeated foe, and Christ "hath abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (II Timothy 1-10).

The Song of Praise

Verse 22

I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee.

There are several themes in these latter verses—resurrection, witnessing, victory—but probably the most important concept is that of praise. In fact, there is a very remarkable structural pattern that comes to the surface when we consider this theme of praise.

In a very real sense, the very reason for the unique phenomenon of *language* is in order that God might be able to communicate His will and His plans to men, and that men might in turn respond to God in *praise!* The ability of communicating in intelligible, abstract, symbolic vocabularies and phonologies is an ability shared equally by all tribes among mankind, but an ability which is completely absent among animals. The phenomenon of language has no evolutionary explanation—it is uniquely an attribute of the image of God in man. And the highest function of human language is to praise the Lord.

This book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible and is uniquely a book of praise. In fact, it is commonly called the *Hallel* Book—the book of the "praises" of Israel. Furthermore, it has a unique structure. The other books of the Bible originally had no chapter and verse divisions—these were developed much later by medieval scholars as a matter of convenience. The chapter and verse divisions of the book of Psalms, however, were there right from the start. Each psalm comprises a chapter, and the verses correspond to the obvious poetic divisions.

It is also significant that the medium in which God first chose to communicate His eternal Word in written form to man was the Hebrew language. The Hebrew language, in turn, is built around an alphabet of 22 letters, so that this number (22) seems often associated in the Bible with both the written Word and the living Word, Jesus Christ. Christ, in fact, called Himself the "Alpha and Omega" (that is, the first and last letters of the Greek language in which the New Testament was written—see Revelation 22:13), thus emphasizing that He is, Himself, the very Word of God (John 1:1,14).

Now, although the great theme of the book of Psalms is that of praise, it is remarkable that the verb "to praise" (Hebrew *halla*) is never used in the first 21 of the psalms. The Holy Spirit seemingly refrained from using this word until it could first be recorded as coming from the lips of the suffering Savior, here in this 22nd Psalm.

It must be much more than coincidence, considering the fact that this number "22" represents both the Word and the very purpose of language, that it is found for the first time (at least in the book of Psalms) here in this 22nd verse of the 22nd Psalm! "I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I *praise* thee!" Right at the very pinnacle of His suffering, He sings out a great note of praise, for His Father had heard and delivered Him. He had not, after all, really "hid His face from Him," nor had He "abhorred the affliction" (verse 24); He had, indeed, heard His cry, and when the cup of suffering had been emptied, He hastened once again to His presence.

This 22nd verse is quoted in the book of Hebrews, in the very chapter to which we have already frequently referred in this exposition. But there it is rendered: "For both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one [i.e., of one Father]; for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren,

in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee" (Hebrews 2:11,12). The congregation in which He is the great "Song-Leader," the "Praise-Leader," is thus the church. The "assembly of the wicked" around Him had been routed, but there was left around the cross a very little flock—the remnants of that first church that He had established upon the Rock of His deity and the salvation He would provide through His blood (note Matthew 16:18; 18:17; Acts 20:28). It was in the midst of *that* congregation (John the beloved, his mother, and the other women) that He first offered up the sacrifice of praise, but since that day, "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). In His prayer the previous night in the upper room, He said, "I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world" (John 17:6). That name was "Father," and He was not ashamed to call them His "brethren."

The Victory and the Commission

Verses 23–31

Ye that fear the LORD, praise him; all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify him; and fear him, all ye the seed of Israel.

For he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto him, he heard.

My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation: I will pay my vows before them that fear him.

The meek shall eat and be satisfied: they shall praise the LORD that seek him: your heart shall live for ever.

All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee.

For the kingdom is the LORD's: and he is the governor among the nations.

All they that be fat upon earth shall eat and worship: all they that go down to the dust shall bow before him: and none can keep alive his own soul.

A seed shall serve him; it shall be accounted to the LORD for a generation.

They shall come, and shall declare his righteousness unto a people that shall be born, that he hath done this.

At verse 23, there is a change of person. In the first 22 verses the entire psalm is a prayer, with the one on the cross praying to His God and Father, the pronouns "I" and "thee" appearing almost continuously. At this point, however, the psalm becomes an exhortation to its readers. The Holy Spirit Himself, through David, speaks of Christ in the third person and directly to His readers in the second person.

The theme thus now turns sharply from one of suffering to one of praise. Christ first offered praise because of victory over death and Satan. Now we may continually (Hebrews 13:15) offer the sacrifice of praise, giving thanks to Him for His great love for us. "Ye that fear the Lord, praise Him!—glorify Him!—fear Him!"

Then comes the natural response to this great exhortation, in verse 25: "*My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation: I will pay my vows before them that fear him.*" This is the testimony of the redeemed. As the Lord even now leads our praises in each little congregation, so we shall all one day share our testimonies in that great congregation, as we enter "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits

of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant" (Hebrews 12:22–24).

And in that great day, "*The meek shall eat and be satisfied: they shall praise the LORD that seek him: your heart shall live forever. All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee. For the kingdom is the LORD's: and he is the governor among the nations*" (verses 26–28). In these verses are summed up all the great prophecies and promises of all the ages, when God's great purposes in creation will have finally been accomplished. Every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that the Lamb who was on the altar is the King on the eternal throne. Both those that prosper ("*the fat upon earth*") and those who die ("*all they that go down to the dust*") shall bow down to Him. Though "*none can keep alive his own soul,*" we shall forever thank Him for the travail through which He passed in order to keep our souls alive through the endless ages.

In the meantime, we that have been thus "born again" through receiving His life by faith comprise "*a seed that shall serve Him*" (verse 30). Remember again the scarlet worm and the many sons brought forth through suffering. This innumerable spiritual progeny will continue serving Him until the coming day when He will be recognized as governor among the nations. The latter part of verse 30 says literally: "*This shall be accounted of the Lord for a generation.*" That is, each succeeding generation would continue recounting the same old, but always new, story of the great love of the One who had died to bring life. "One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts" (Psalm 145:4).

This is the final refrain of Psalm 22. "*They shall come, and shall declare his righteousness unto a people that shall be born, that he hath done this.*"

This very last phrase is, literally, "He hath finished!" The mighty act which the Scarlet One had been about ever since He left the presence of His Father in glory, to be "*cast upon Him from the womb*" (verse 10), culminating in the cross, has been accomplished. The victory cry, "It is finished!" still echoes through the centuries, and provides continuing comfort and counsel for the seed that serves Him.