

Rev Alasdair I. Macleod: Psalm 22

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 0 0] I'd like you to bear the story in mind, but to turn now to the book of Psalms and to Psalm 22. If you have a Bible, I think Psalm 22 would be the place to keep open in front of the even thoughts.

As I said in our mind, we want to keep in our thoughts what we've just read about Jesus. Psalm 22, I'll just read verse 1 for the moment.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me from the words of my groaning?

We've just read in Matthew's account of the experience of Christ at Calvary, that Jesus said these words that we have in the first half of verse 1 here.

These great words from Scripture. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Never was there surely a more mysterious cry in the history of the universe than this one.

[1 : 2 0] Here is the Son of God in human nature on the cross and crying out to God, why and why me?

It would have been a very piercing thing to hear in the darkness and perhaps in silence. And then all of a sudden that darkness and silence is pierced by a scream from the cross.

This anguished question from the Lord, why have you forsaken me? Over the years the mystics have often spoken of something called the dark night of the soul.

Something dramatic and devastating in their own spiritual experience, the darkest night they've ever known. But in all the dark nights of the soul, there was never as dark a night as there was at Calvary and dark in the very soul of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This was the dark night of the soul in the whole history of the universe, in the history of redemption, in the history of Jesus.

[2 : 4 8] This was the ultimate dark night. Now there are many mysteries of course about this cry that I will not be able to plumb for you and with you.

I think it's very important just as we begin to notice that while it's an anguished cry, it's also a cry of faith.

It doesn't go into any conclusion of despair or distrust. It is my God, my God.

It's the cry of the man of faith, the model of faith. It's the cry of the ultimate believer. I also believe that the Lord, the Father, was loving and upholding his Son here as never before.

Sometimes it's taken in another way. But the Father always loved the Son and while the Son was here not conscious of the Father's love, the Father loved him, perhaps loved him in a very special way here.

[4 : 0 7] Maybe saying, this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. The Father delighted in the Son's obedience to death, even the death of the cross.

And I believe also that the Father was upholding the Son as he always had through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Now again, the Lord was not conscious of being upheld by the Father.

That's why he cried this question. But he never needed to be upheld more than he was being upheld in these desperate moments. And so I believe that the Father was loving the Son and was upholding the Son, even while the Son was suffering hell for us in the darkness.

As he had to say to the Father, have you gone too? Others had abandoned him. His closest followers had left him.

He felt so alone and now he has to say to Heaven and to the Father himself, have you gone too? A very, very mysterious cry.

[5 : 26] As we look at this psalm and as we reflect on the suffering of Calvary, there are two things I want us to think about. First of all, I want us to think of the prayer of anguish that we have at Calvary.

And we're going to look at verses 1 to 21 of this psalm, just very briefly in a summary. And then secondly, I want us to think of the messianic work of Calvary, as we have that in the pictures of this psalm.

So these two things, the anguished prayer of Calvary and the messianic work of Calvary. And then each of them will think of something threefold, one, two, three.

So first of all, the anguished prayer of verses 1 to 21. Now Jesus, as far as we know, only cried the first half of verse 1 out loud on the cross.

And it's very moving that we have that in the Gospels, in the Aramaic language that Jesus himself spoke.

[6 : 49] I don't speak Gaelic and I certainly don't speak Aramaic. And I can't pronounce the words the way that have come to the lips of Jesus. But isn't it moving, isn't it poignant that we're so close to the cry that we can hear it in his own tongue?

Ely, Ely, LeMah, Saba Thani, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? So while he said that out loud, we know that.

I also believe that he prayed the whole of Psalm 22 himself. That Psalm 22 is a prophecy of the psychology of Jesus on the cross.

And the praying of Jesus on the cross. And that, as I said, is a prayer of anguish detailed here in verses 1 to 21.

Now I want you to look at this anguish in these verses and to see that there's a threefold cycle of prayer. Very often in scripture people pray three times for something.

[8 : 05] Remember Paul with a thorn in the flesh, he prayed three times for this. Jesus in Gethsemane prayed three times. And here on the cross we have three prayers here in the Psalm.

Now if you look at it, they're there in verses 1 to 5 and then 6 to 11 and then 12 to 21. I'm not going to look at them in detail, but I'd like you to note that and remember it and look at it again.

Because once you see it, it's very clear to you what's going on. And in each of these three cycles of prayer, there's a bit where he expresses his pain and suffering.

And then a second bit where he appeals to God for help. So I want to just note each of these three in turn. So first of all in verses 1 to 5, you see that the first two verses are him expressing his pain.

Why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me? I was crying and maybe he's saying I was crying in the daylight. You didn't answer. And now I'm crying in the darkness and I find no rest.

[9 : 28] So here he is pouring out his soul expressing his desperate pain. And then in verses 3 to 5, as he went, he's arguing in prayer and pleading with God.

And he pleads with God on the basis of God's holiness. And then especially on the fact that in the past, in the story of Israel, people have proved God as they trusted him.

Do you see the word trusted three times, four and five? In you, our fathers, trusted. They trusted and you delivered them. They cried and were rescued. And they trusted and were not put to shame.

He knows his own shame on the cross. And he's saying, Lord, in the whole history of Israel, again and again and again, people trusted you and they proved you to be the answer in their time of need.

Now I'm pleading with you. And then in verses 6 to 11, you see the same pattern again. In the first few verses, 6, 7, 8, there, he expresses his pain again in different words.

[10 : 45] He feels like a worm, not like a man. And he's scorned and despised and he talks about mockery and laughter and people saying he trusted in the Lord, let him deliver him. You know, of course, that in the Gospels, in the accounts of Calvary, these things came true.

That people did mock him and laugh at him. That people did say he trusted in the Lord, let him deliver him now if he really is somebody in whom he delights.

And then notice in 9-11 that he turns again to plead with God. And this time, it's not pleading on the basis of what the fathers proved God to be, but it's on the basis of what he had known God to be in his own life from the very beginning.

He says, you're the one who took me from the womb. You're the one who looked after me when my mother was nursing me.

You're the one who's been with me from the very beginning and all my days. So don't be far away from me now because no one to help me here and you are the only one who can help me.

[12 : 05] And in the third cycle, verses 12-21, now in the first verses there, and it's a longer section, he expresses his pain in all kinds of images.

At first, he uses images of various animals, I mean all his enemies around him, and maybe demonic enemies just seem like bulls and lions and the rest of it.

They're so fierce in their enmity and their violence like a ravening and roaring lion. And then he expresses the pain of the crucifixion in amazing detail.

And remember this is one thousand years before the actual event and here it is prophesied. My bones are out of joint. They say that when somebody was put on a cross and it was lifted up and it was dropped into a socket in the ground, that most of the bones in the top half of the body were dislocated.

And he says, my bones are out of joint. He talks about his thirst dried up like a pot shirt. My tongue sticks to my jaws. And remember Jesus saying on the cross, in that terrible dehydration and raging fever and burning thirst, I thirst.

[13 : 28] And then verse 16 says, they've pierced my hands and my feet. Very detailed reference to the cross.

And verse 18 is quoted in John's Gospel in the account of Calvary. They divide my garments among for my clothing. They cast lots. This is the soldiers who would gamble for the clothes of Jesus.

And then again, verses 19 to 21, the third cycle of prayer concludes. He appeals again to God. And he's saying to the Lord, in effect, this is the out of my sorrows need.

Don't be far. You're my help. Come quickly. Deliver my precious life and save me from the dogs and the lions. I need you now as I've never needed you before.

So can you see these three cycles of prayer? And as I'm saying, I think it's an amazing insight into the inspiration of Scripture that, in a sense, a thousand years before the event, this Psalm is giving us more insight into the psychology of Jesus on the cross.

[15 : 00] Than even the Gospels themselves give us. They tell the story as it's happening, as you see it happening. But this Psalm is giving us a psychological depth to the prayer life of Jesus on the cross that you find, I think, nowhere else in the whole of Scripture.

Now, of course, I want to stress that this is Jesus and this is about Jesus, but it also just very briefly say something to us about our dark times or even our dark night of the soul that we are called in the footsteps of Jesus to continue to talk to God, to tell God how we're feeling, because that's what Jesus did, to be honest about our pain, and then to plead with God, even to argue with God, and on the basis of his character and his words, and when he's done for others in the past and what he's done for us in the past, to plead with that God to come to me in my darkness and to answer me in my anguish.

The model of Jesus is saying to us in your toughest times, please keep talking to God, being honest with God and asking God for what you need, because Jesus did that. First, he prays based on the history of his people and how they proved God.

Then he prays based on his own experience from the very beginning of his human life and how he has proved God. And then he prays based on how he's feeling now and what he needs now, and saying please at this moment of all moments, don't be far from me.

A prayer of anguish, clear here, a prayer at Calvary. But I want secondly to think with you of the messianic work of Jesus as it's portrayed in this song, and again just to sketch it out. And when I use the language of the Messiah, we touched on it last night, but I want today to emphasise the fact that the language of Messiah or Christ speaks of the anointed one, the Christ, the Messiah is explicitly the anointed one, anointed by the Spirit.

[17 : 53] And you all know that in our theology for many years, we have understood that to mean that the Messiah came to be the anointed prophet, and the anointed priest, and the anointed king.

So I want to take that three fold office and see it in this Psalm and in what happens at Calvary, and to take it in the order priest, and then prophet, and then king.

First of all Jesus as the anointed one is our anointed priest on the cross bearing sin.

Now it's clear in the story of the cross that that is the rationale for the suffering of Calvary. There is no other explanation that makes sense, but that Jesus, the sinless one, was taking our sin and bating our sin.

There is no other explanation for his being forsaken in these moments than that he was being forsaken because of our darkness.

[19 : 15] Darkness in the Bible often speaks of judgment. In fact darkness is a symbol for hell, outer darkness.

And so when darkness comes down over Golgotha, it's God saying judgment is happening here. In a sense spiritually hell is happening here.

And so Jesus for his people experiences the darkness that their sins deserve so that they might go to a place of light forever.

Now as Jesus is our priest there bearing sin, you can see from the language of verse 1 and following that his language is different from his usual language, and his experience is different from his usual experience.

His language is different because never before in his gospel story had Jesus said, my God.

[20 : 23] He'd always said Father, he'd always said Abba, and throughout the prayer life of Jesus he says Abba, he says it even in Gethsemane.

He says it even on the cross, when Luke recounts the words from the cross, the first one is Father forgive them, they know not what they do. And the last one is Father into your hands I commit my spirit.

So even on the cross, at the beginning and the end of his experience there, he says Father. But in the middle, in the darkness, he cannot say Father.

He's bereft of his normal awareness of the fatherliness of God. And he only knows himself associated with sin and with the curse and everything he sees and hears and feels says to him, I am sin.

He was made sin for us. So as he looks up, he can only see God as judge over him and over the sin that he is bearing.

[21 : 34] It's very significant that it's so different from his habitual language and prayer. He always said Father, only in this prayer does he say, my God, my God, you've forsaken me.

It's different from his normal language and it's also different from his normal experience. He had always known the closeness of the father. He had always known intimate communion with the father.

I mean, from all eternity, the father had always delighted in him. And throughout his life in this world, he had known that delight.

Sometimes it's expressed in dramatic ways that his baptism or the transfiguration is a voice from heaven. This is my beloved son.

Even in Gethsemane, there's an angel sent to strengthen him. But here, in these moments, there's no voice from heaven. And there's no angel.

[22 : 38] There's no comfort. There's no communion. Completely different from his normal habitual experience of the closest possible intimacy with the father.

And why is that? Because he is bearing sin. And because he must feel forsakenness, as God says in terms of hell, depart.

Jesus has to feel that depart in his own soul, in his own experience, because he is the priest bearing sin for me and for you.

What an amazing thing that is. But he's also the anointed prophet. The prophet of Calvary proclaiming truth.

Even in these few words. My God, why have you forsaken me? He's proclaiming great truths about God and about us.

[23 : 41] About God, he is saying that this is a God both of justice and of love at the same time. He's a God of justice who even when it's his own son who's bearing sin, will deal with sin as sin deserves.

But he's a God of love who's doing all this for us out of love for us. So there is no more dramatic demonstration in the whole history of redemption of both the justice and love of God at the same time.

Then at Calvary, where these two attributes of God kiss each other, an amazing picture of God who is holy and righteous and always true to himself.

And a God who is also loving and passionate and compassionate. And in that way also true to himself because God is love.

So this cry from the cross says I'm a just God and I'm a loving God. I'm doing this for you and for your salvation.

[24 : 58] I will not spare my son anything because sin deserves what's happening here. And because I love the people for whom he is dying.

But as a prophet, he's also saying something about us. Something about what our sins deserve. Our sins deserve that we be forsaken.

But Jesus is taking that for us. And he's also saying something about our significance as image-bearers of God. As people who are precious to God.

As people who have immortal souls that God wants to save. And on the cross this prophet is saying, even in these words, that God loves us and God wants us.

And God is doing all that is necessary so that we might not go to hell to the place of eternal forsakenness. But that we might know fellowship with God forever.

[26 : 05] And communion with him because Jesus was bereft of communion as he took our sins. And the wrath of God fought our sins.

So he's the anointed priest bearing sin. He's the anointed prophet proclaiming truth. And he's the anointed king seeing victory.

Now for this you need to go back to Psalm 22 and quickly survey the rest of the Psalm. For verse 21 and on to the end.

I won't go into this in detail. Jesus of course is a king all his life. And he's a king on the cross. But what I'm saying is his kingship is also seen in the Psalm as on the cross.

He sees his royal victory because he's going to rise and ascend and sit at the right hand and see the fruit of his work. And he sees all of that on the cross.

[27 : 12] Now that's very important I think in understanding the Psalm. To believe that the rest of the Psalm from verse 21 is also Jesus on the cross.

In his final moments on the cross with the darkness lifting from his soul. He sees his victory.

He sees his royal triumph. He sees his enthronement. He sees the success of his mission. All of that before he dies.

Now if you go back to the end of verse 21. It says, you have rescued me. That's the way the verse ends.

Save me from the lion, from the horns of the wild oxen. I think we better put these two together and then say you have rescued me. So he saw an answer to his prayer on the cross before he died.

[28 : 19] Maybe even better to say what's said in the footnote, an alternative translation. You have heard me or you have answered me.

So remember we're talking about Jesus on the cross all the way through and you read it like this. He finishes this third cycle of prayer. Save me from the mouth of the lion, from the horns of the wild oxen.

And then he says, you have heard me. He comes to a sense of peace. He comes through the crisis and he's able to say to God, you've answered me.

You've heard me. And then all he sees is the victory that's going to come after the cross.

Verses 22 and following, the first focus is on his resurrection and the gospel going to his people. He says, I will tell of your name to my brothers.

[29 : 22] Well, he's about to die. Why does he say that? Because he knows he's going to rise from the dead. And he's going to be back with his brethren, with his disciples.

So he's saying I'm going to rise from the dead. You've heard me. I will tell your name to my brothers in the midst of that congregation. I'll praise you. And then he longs for Jacob, Israel to come to know what he has done for them.

And then as it goes on, it moves to think of the Gentiles and those who will come to know the Lord. For example, verse 27, from all the ends of the earth.

And that includes us. We are at the ends of the earth in terms of what the geography of the first century world was like. Never mind a millennium before.

So all the ends of the earth will hear and turn to the Lord. And he talks about the great of the earth in verse 29, even great people, prosperous people will bow.

[30 : 29] And then verse 30, he talks of posterity and coming generations. And verse 31, a people yet unborn. You see what's happening on the cross.

His prayer has been answered. Peace has come to his soul. And he sees his resurrection and his mission. He sees the reality of his resurrection and that he will meet his brothers again.

He sees the success of his mission that it will go to Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. And generations to come and people yet unborn will come to know the gospel because of what he has done for them on the cross.

And that's why at the end he can say, Father, in great peace I commit my spirit. And some of you are still doubting whether this part of the Psalm was said by Jesus on the cross.

Do you remember what his penultimate cry was? It is finished. And how does the Psalm end?

[31 : 43] He has done it. Very, very close to these words. So Jesus sees his resurrection. He sees his mission stretching through the generations and the centuries.

And then he says, it's done. It's finished. And then he says, Father, in your hands I commit my spirit. And then he dies.

And having seen resurrection and evangelistic, glory and success, he says, it's done.

And he dies in peace knowing again communion with his Father and knowing that it has all been worth it for us.

And so today we celebrate what Jesus has done for us in the cross and we thank him that he suffered that anguish for me and for you.

[32 : 45] And we thank him too that we are part of the evangelistic success that he saw even on the cross, that even the ends of the earth, we have come to know him.

And want today to remember his death and thank him for all that we owe to our priest and our prophet and our King. Amen.