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Psalms of Life, VII

The Anguish and Triumph of the Cross

Psalm 22

Pastor Bryan Clark

The predominant religion in India is Hinduism. The landscape is cluttered with hundreds, probably thousands, of small Hindu temples that house their manmade gods. In the evenings people by the hundreds of thousands walk to these temples with their gifts and their sacrifices, hoping at some point to gain the favor of the gods to deliver them from the hopelessness and despair in which they live.

As you travel through the country, now and then you see a Christian church, easily identified by the cross on the building. It is the *cross* that distinguishes Christianity from every other religion of the world. It is the cross that is so different. Rather than bringing our sacrifices to gain the favor of the gods, the cross represents the reality that our God sacrificed Himself. Rather than bringing our gifts and offerings, hoping somehow to appease the gods to get their favor, the cross reminds us that God is the one who offers *us* the gift. It is the cross that takes us from despair and hopelessness to life.

Of course, when we talk about the cross we understand that it's symbolic of God Himself who became flesh and died on that cross in payment for your sin and my sin. Those who place their trust in Jesus' death on the cross experience His salvation.

It's hard to imagine what Jesus must have thought about and processed as He hung there on that cross 2,000 years ago. I think sometimes because we're so aware of His deity—the fact that He is God—we sometimes fail to recognize His humanity. As Jesus hung on that cross He was still subject to the agonies and the emotions and the suffering of any human. What did He think about? How did He process that?

The closest we have to understanding that is actually found in the Old Testament and is recorded in Psalm 22. It is identified as a "Psalm of David" and there is some discussion as to whether David was writing out of His own suffering, or whether this was purely a prophetic psalm where David was writing about the suffering of the Savior to come. But virtually all evangelical commentators agree that ultimately this is a prophecy about Jesus and those hours when He hung on the cross. They would say the voice of the psalm is actually not just the voice of David, but more than that, it is the voice of Jesus Himself. Some think that Jesus meditated on this psalm as He went through the hours on the cross, and that may very well be. One commentator identified 33 specific prophecies concerning Jesus and the cross that were all specifically, perfectly fulfilled at the cross—33 just from this psalm!

That's impressive when we realize that this psalm was written a thousand years before Jesus became flesh. We can document the fact that this psalm was in existence a thousand years before the crucifixion. We can also document historically that the psalm was perfectly fulfilled at the cross. Now, the only way to explain that is that this is not a manmade book. This is a divinely inspired book, and the prophecies were fulfilled perfectly.

After Jesus had risen from the dead, He met two of His disciples that were on the road to Emmaus, and He began to explain to them that they should have known about His death, burial and resurrection because it was prophesied. He said it was in the writings of Moses. He said it was written in the prophets and he said specifically it's in the Psalms. Now surely when He said that it

was in the psalms, He was referring to Psalm 22 that clearly outlined the suffering, the agony, the anguish of the cross.

Before we look at the content of the psalm itself, we do learn something just from the structure of the psalm. The psalm was written in such a way that it alternates back and forth between the anguish of the moment as Jesus hung on that cross and His thinking about what is true about God and His person and His character. It goes back and forth like that. As a matter of fact, the transitions are pretty much identified by the word “yet.” You see it in verse 3; you see it in verse 9; you see it in verse 19 (in that case it’s the word “but”). So He endures His suffering, *yet* this is what He knows to be true...and then He endures His suffering, *yet* this is what He knows to be true.

It’s the balance that’s necessary for us to endure the difficult times in life. Sometimes we refer to some theologians as “ivory tower thinkers.” What we mean by that is that they discuss their theology so far removed from the realities of life that it seems to have no intersection, no relevance to life. They’re just ivory tower thinkers. There are others who develop their theology purely on the basis of their experience. Everything is experiential and, based on that, they form their views of God. We have to find some level of balance where our theology intersects life, where we deal with the realities of life, but we also understand what is true about God as revealed in His Word. It’s that balance that gets us through the sufferings of life, and that’s certainly modeled in this psalm.

The opening verse of Psalm 22 clearly identifies Jesus as the speaker, when He says:

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? (v. 1a, NASB)

If you look at the Gospels, these are the words that come from the lips of Jesus as He hangs on the cross: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” In some mysterious way that certainly cannot be fully explained or understood, there was some level of separation between the Godhead during those hours on the cross. There was a separation between God the Father and God the Son. It was the first time in all eternity, and it was the last time in all eternity, that there was some level of break in their community. Now, how that’s possible I don’t think we can really explain or understand. But we do know the Bible teaches from cover to cover that it is sin that somehow separates us from God. When Jesus became the sin bearer, actually more than that—He became sin for us, the New Testament says—it created a sin, a separation between God the Father and God the Son. Jesus feels the anguish of that and He cries out, “Why have You forsaken me?”

Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. (v. 1b, NASB)

That word “groaning” is a vivid Hebrew word. It was used to describe the roaring of a lion. It was used to describe the claps of thunder. It’s used to describe an animal that was crying out in distress. So it’s a very vivid term that Jesus in His anguish cried out to the Father.

O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer; and by night, but I have no rest. (v. 2, NASB)

A lot of people think this is a reference to the day and night that Jesus hung on the cross. You remember, from 12:00 noon to 3:00 in the afternoon, the land became dark as if it was night. It’s probably a reference to, both in the light and in the darkness, while Jesus hung on the cross He cried out. But it seemed like God didn’t care. It seemed like God wasn’t listening to Him.

Verse 3:

Yet [*this is the alternate thought now; he’s remembering what’s true*] **You are holy.**
(NASB)

Of course, this is what everything was about on the cross. It was about the holiness of God and the fact that God in His holiness could not have fellowship with sin. Therefore, that's the reason for this separation, and he's remembering that. He's remembering what's true.

Yet you are holy, O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel. In You our father trusted; they trusted and You delivered them. To You they cried out and were delivered; in You they trusted and were not disappointed.

(vs. 3-5, NASB)

This is a familiar pattern in the psalms where, in the midst of suffering and anguish, we need to go back and rehearse the faithfulness of God. Oftentimes in the midst of suffering it feels like God has forsaken us. It feels like God isn't listening. It feels like He doesn't care. And it's in those moments that we go back and rehearse the faithfulness of God to His people generation after generation, which is what Jesus was doing at this point on the cross. Sometimes it's years after we've gone through difficult suffering that we're able to look back and see the faithfulness of God in those moments. But in the moment, it's very hard to see.

I've been reading a book (actually it's a secular book by Jim Collins), and he gets into a discussion with Admiral Jim Stockdale, who was a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War. He was a prisoner of war for eight years, and he talked about how he survived. Stockdale says:

"I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."

Collins goes on and he writes:

I didn't say anything for many minutes, and we continued the slow walk toward the faculty club, Stockdale limping and arc-swinging his stiff leg that had never fully recovered from repeated torture. Finally after about a hundred meters of silence, I asked, "Who didn't make it out?" "Oh, that's easy," he said. "The optimists." "The optimists? I don't understand," I said, now completely confused, given what he'd said a hundred meters earlier. The optimists. They were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' But Christmas would come and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' But Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart." Another long pause and more walking. Then he turned to me and said, "This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

- From *Good to Great*, by Jim Collins, Random House, 2001

That's pretty good stuff. That's what Jesus was doing on the cross. He was thinking about the faithfulness of God, and He knows where the story ends. But He still has to endure the brutal facts of the moment.

Verses 6-8:

But I am a worm and not a man, a reproach of men and despised by the people. All who see me sneer at me; they separate with the lip, they wag the head, saying, "Commit yourself to the LORD; let Him deliver him; Let Him rescue him, because He delights in him." (NASB)

When you read the Gospels you realize that this section of the psalm was perfectly fulfilled by the enemies of Jesus. This was exactly what they did; this is exactly what they said at the cross.

Now I suppose a skeptic could say, “Well, Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of Psalm 22 just because He knew the psalm and He recited His part.” But how do you explain the fact that these enemies of Jesus, who had never heard this psalm, still perfectly fulfilled the words and actions of the prophecy, other than it was the very power of God?

But what about that statement in verse 6, when Jesus says, “But I am a worm, not a man”? As Jesus took our sin upon Himself, as He became the sin bearer, He said, “I’m a worm.” Some people think this is a reference to a worm that was called the crimson crocus. It was called that because this crocus would be crushed and created a dye that was a crimson color that was used to dye the fabric of royalty in the first century. And that may be. It was Isaiah the prophet that said Jesus would be crushed for our iniquities, and in a sense He was crushed that we might be stained by His blood. But whatever the imagery, it is the picture that He was so despised, so rejected, so treated that He was no longer a man...He was a worm.

Now, we live in a culture where we’re constantly trying to establish the basis of our esteem—especially trying to establish our esteem apart from God. There are a lot of people in our culture that say you basically just need to think good about yourself—that you need to think high esteem thoughts. Even though you may not be good, even though your thoughts don’t live up to reality, you kind of manufacture a sense of esteem. But that’s really just a mental exercise. There’s no substance to that.

We do struggle with, *What is our value? What is our worth?* And we certainly don’t want to be called a worm. That’s evident by the way we have re-written the hymnbook. The great old hymn says, “Alas! and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die? Would He devote that sacred Head for such a worm as I?” But we can’t take that. We’re not worms, in our opinions. So we’ve re-written the hymn. If you look it up in the hymnbook it now says, “Would He devote that sacred Head for such a sinner as I?” We’re sinners, but we’re not worms. But when Jesus hung on that cross and took our sin, He did say, “I am a worm; I’m not a man.”

The alternating thought is in verses 9-10:

Yet You are He who brought me forth from the womb; You made me trust when upon my mother’s breasts. Upon You I was cast from birth; You have been my God from my mother’s womb.” (NASB)

Jesus is feeling the anguish of being forsaken—of feeling like His cry is not being heard. He’s a worm, He’s not a man, He’s despised, He’s rejected...but yet He remembers this is part of the sovereign plan of the Father. God, from the moment of inception all the way through His life, has guided and protected Him and brought Him to this moment on the cross. This is not a horrible mistake. This is the fulfillment of the will of the Father. Jesus often said when He walked on this earth that He had come to do the will of the Father. And now in these moments He’s remembering that this is no accident. This is accomplishing the perfect will of the Father.

A great example of that would be all the way back when Jesus was an infant and Herod the king wanted Him dead. It was God who intervened and spoke to Mary and Joseph and they fled to Egypt with the infant Jesus, that His life might be spared. But all throughout Jesus’ journey, the Father guided Him and protected Him and brought Him to this moment on the cross. Now Jesus is rehearsing that. Starting in verse 11, He begins to lay out these pictures, these metaphors, these images of His suffering:

Be not far from me, for trouble is near; for there is none to help. Many bulls have surrounded me; strong bulls of Bashan have encircled me. (v. 11-12, NASB)

He's saying his enemies are like the bulls of Bashan. That would be the area today we would call the Golan Heights—very fertile, very good area for livestock, and the bulls there were strong and powerful. So that's the ways his enemies are—they're like these powerful bulls.

They open wide their mouth at me, as a ravening and a roaring lion. [*They're like a lion wanting to devour him.*] **I am poured out like water** [*typically seen as lacking any type of shape or substance; he's just melted away and is being poured out*], **and all my bones are out of joint** [*which was a typical description of one who was crucified: the bones are pulled out of their sockets and their joints*]; **my heart is like wax; it is melted within me.** **My strength is dried up like a potsherd** [*or a piece of pottery; it's dried and cracked*], **and my tongue cleaves to my jaws** [*it's said of one who was crucified that they so dehydrated that their tongue would literally stick to the side of their mouth*]; **and you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs have surrounded me; a band of evildoers has encompassed me; they pierced my hands and my feet.** (v. 13-16, NASB)

It's very interesting to realize the Hebrew people a thousand years before Christ knew nothing of crucifixion; they'd never heard of such a thing. Yet the psalmist writes perfectly a description of one who is crucified.

I can count all my bones. They look, they stare at me [*referring to the nakedness of the cross*]; **they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots** [*a reference to the Roman soldiers who again perfectly fulfilled this prophecy*]. **But You, O LORD, be not far off; O You my help, hasten to my assistance. Deliver my soul from the sword, my only life from the power of the dog. Save me from the lion's mouth; and from the horns of the wild oxen You answer me.** (vs. 17-21, NASB)

Verse 19 has the alternate thought again. He goes from his anguish to what he knows is true and he cries out. At the end of verse 21 is a key statement, when he says, "You answer me." It could be translated "You have heard me." He goes from the anguish of feeling like he's forsaken, that God doesn't hear him, that he is despised, that he is a worm...to the realization that God has indeed heard his cry.

At this point the psalm turns, and we go from the anguish of the cross to the *triumph* of the cross. Now he begins to say that for the rest of eternity the cross will be the triumph of God. He says:

I will tell of Your name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You. You who fear the LORD, praise Him; all you descendants of Jacob, glorify Him, and stand in awe of Him, all you descendants of Israel. For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; nor has He hidden His face from Him; but when he cried to him for help, He heard. (vs. 22-24, NASB)

Imagine Jesus hanging on this cross through the day, and He has gone through the anguish as it's revealed in Psalm 22. But maybe in the last minutes of His life on the cross He begins to rehearse the triumph of the cross, aware of what He is accomplishing by His death. Verse 25:

From You comes my praise in the great assembly [*the cross will be the focal point of the worship of God's people*]; **I shall pay my vows before those who fear Him** [*the cross will become the motivation for our service and our offerings*]. **The afflicted will eat and be satisfied** [*the cross will provide that which satisfies the*

restless soul]; **those who seek Him will praise the LORD. Let your heart live forever!** (vs. 25-26, NASB)

The cross will be the basis by which we gain eternal life—that centerpiece upon which the people of God will worship and will serve and will bring our offerings. It will be the basis by which our restless souls find rest. It will be the basis of our eternal life.

All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will worship before You. For the kingdom is the LORD's and He rules over the nations. (vs. 27-28, NASB)

People from every tribe and tongue and nation will come to the cross, and on the basis of the cross they will come together as the people of God and they will worship Him. People in India, people in Africa, people in Lincoln, Nebraska will all come together on the basis of the cross as the people of God and will worship.

All the prosperous of the earth will eat and worship, all those who go down to the dust will bow before Him, even he who cannot keep his soul alive [*the rich, the poor, the diseased, the dying will all come to the cross as the basis of their salvation*]. Posterity will serve Him; it will be told of the Lord to the coming generation. They will come and will declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He has performed it. (vs. 29-31, NASB)

Generation after generation after generation will come back to the cross—to that moment when Jesus died—as the basis of their salvation and the focal point of their worship. The last line of verse 31, “that He has performed it,” could be translated, “It is finished.” You are aware that when Jesus hung on the cross the last thing He uttered were the words, “It is finished”—as if He had processed through Psalm 22, rehearsed the triumph of the cross, and concluded that the work was completed. It's actually an accounting term that means “paid in full.”

Jesus went through the anguish of the cross and the separation from the Father, becoming a worm, despised and rejected. But He also remembered the faithfulness of God and that God had brought Him to this point to accomplish His purpose. But then He moved to the triumph of the cross. The cross would be remembered for the rest of eternity as the basis by which the people of God worship and serve and bring our offerings and have eternal life. It would be the basis by which the nations of the world would come together as one people. It would be the focal point of history, and with that having been accomplished, He said, “It is finished.” And He died.

To the millions of people who live lives of desperation and hopelessness, that flock to the Hindu temples hoping someday to gain the favor of the gods, they just need to be told, “It is finished.” To the millions of people who are caught up in religious performance to somehow please God and merit salvation, they just need to be told, “It is finished.” For those who struggle with the restlessness of their soul, they just need to know it is *finished*. The work of salvation has been accomplished. God Himself made the sacrifice that we might have life. That is the message of the cross. There is nothing more we need to do. There is nothing we need to prove. It is finished!

Alas! and did my Savior bleed? And did my sovereign die? Would He devote that sacred Head for such a worm as I? Yes! Yes! The answer is yes, He did! And it is finished.