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Psalm 22:1-21

First Message

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# THE FAITH OF CHRIST

I enjoy reading biographies of Christians. Tracing the sovereign hand of God through the ordinary events of someone's life is very satisfying to me. But I like autobiographies of Christians even more. I count it a great privilege when a fellow-believer allows me to enter into his deepest thoughts and feelings. A few years ago, I read a fascinating biography of George Macdonald, Scotland's beloved storyteller. Then a friend gave me a rare gem which is now out of print, *Diary of an Old Soul*, George Macdonald's poetic reflections of his journey of faith. I was surprised to learn that like me, George Macdonald also had lost a son and a daughter to death. His reflections about these events touched my soul deeply.

How wonderful it would be if Jesus had left a diary of what went on in his soul, especially during Holy Week. We could call it *The Diary of The Holy One*.

Today is Palm Sunday, the day when Christians celebrate the triumphal entry of our Lord into Jerusalem. This day marks the beginning of the climactic week that culminated in the cross. In the days when Jesus walked upon this earth, Israel was anticipating the arrival of a coming king. For 100 years, the nation had been looking for a Messiah to liberate them from their Roman oppressors. He would cleanse the land, rebuild the temple, and vindicate the Jews. Their model for the coming kingdom sprang from the Maccabean era. In a military revolt in 164 B.C., the Maccabees cleansed the temple and liberated the land from foreign rule. In that first century atmosphere of expectation, therefore, a mere spark was all that was needed to ignite the fires of revolt and give birth to revolutionary movements headed by so-called messiahs. During the ten years of Pontius Pilate's procuratorship (A.D. 26-36), historians record that at least seven revolts broke out in Judea alone.

In the midst of these turbulent times, Jesus entered Jerusalem on that Passover week. He entered the city in a manner that was quite contrary to the expectations of his followers, but one that was clearly in line with what had been foretold by Zechariah. Jesus humbly rode into Jerusalem, mounted on the foal of a donkey, his feet dragging in the dust. Scripture records that the expectant and excited crowds who greeted him laid palm branches, even their cloaks, along his path. They cried, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!" (Psalm 118:25); "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David; Hosanna in the highest" (Mark 11:9-10).

What was going on in the heart of Jesus as these events unfolded? How did he view them in light of the suffering that he knew was coming? The book of Hebrews gives us a clue which reveals that there were two conflicting emotions resonating in his soul. The author wrote, "for the joy set before Him [He] endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb 12:2). Yes, Jesus had a vision of joy to come, but before that joy was realized he had to endure a bloody, shameful death on a cross. How did these conflicting emotions of joy and shame play themselves out in his soul? Was this dichotomy a simple

matter of acceptance by faith, or did the tension of these conflicts tear at his soul and raise doubts in his mind?

The answer to this question is given in the four Aramaic words, "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*" which Jesus spoke on the cross (Psalm 22:1). In his quoting the opening line of Psalm 22, I think Jesus was evoking the entire psalm. Written by David, Psalm 22 describes in metaphorical terms a time of terror which David once had to endure. But this divine scripture became prophetic of the greater David to come. As such, it describes what went on in the soul of Jesus during the events of the crucifixion. Our Lord's vision of joy did not come easy. It was born through painful labor which rent his soul in two. Psalm 22 resonates back and forth between past confidence and present terror. But this pain gave birth to a new vision of the future—"the joy set before Him." So strengthened was Jesus by this that he was able to endure the cross, despising the shame.

As we approach this psalm we are treading on holy ground. I feel unworthy to comment on what might have gone on in the soul of Jesus. Yet were it not for this text we would be robbed of the greatest story ever told. These verses describe the holy trauma of Jesus as he was made the "perfecter of our faith." Truly, it is the *Diary of The Holy One*.

The psalm opens with a cry of terror from the lips of the Savior.

## I. Introductory Cry of Terror: "Why?" (22:1-2)

*(For the choir director; upon Aijeleth Hashshahar. A Psalm of David.)*

**My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?**

**Far from my deliverance (*yeshuah*) are the words of my groaning.**

**O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer;**

**And by night, but there is no rest for me. (NASB)**

These opening words describe the three-fold trauma that gripped the soul of Jesus.

### (a) A Trauma to Be Immortalized

David's trauma would be immortalized in the hymnal of Israel. As the dedication indicates, the psalm was written for the choir director (it was even given a melody line). It was meant to be sung by all of Israel, so that when Messiah came and acted out the drama of the psalm, the melody and lyrics would already be in the hearts of the Jews.

Psalm 22, therefore, is not some little praise chorus. It is the great concerto of divine anguish. How tragic, to think that although God had already written the lyrics, there was no choir to sing it when Jesus acted it out on the cross. How sad, that in our own day we have to go back almost 100 years in the history of the church to find the lyrics and melody for a hymn based on the words of this wonderful psalm. Let us honor the King who bared his anguished soul for us.

Let us sing this psalm in its entirety and teach it to our children so that they might know the Holy One of God.

### (b) A Trauma of the Unexpected

Jesus' cry here, "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*" is the Aramaic version of the Hebrew words, "My God, My God, *why* have You forsaken Me?" Jesus asks why. He seems unprepared for what is coming. When my son died, I was utterly unprepared for what happened. As a young parent, I was filled with dreams and expectations, but all of that changed in a moment. A feeling of terror gripped my soul. All that my heart could say was, "Why?" This, too, was the cry of Jesus: Why? He, too, was utterly gripped by the terror in his own soul.

### (c) A Trauma of Abandonment

But the trauma was to become even more terrible, for the sense of loss that Jesus felt was a direct challenge to his identity as the Son of God. When God made a covenant with David, he told him that he would have a line of sons and that he himself would be a Father to them, and that prayer would be the mark of intimacy of their relationship (2 Sam 7). In Psalm 2, we learn that each time a king was crowned in Israel, the Father promised, "*Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance.*" The king would rule through prayer, and God would answer him, thereby vindicating the relationship and declaring that indeed this was the "Son of God." This is what happened at the baptism of Jesus. The voice of God from the heavens was heard to declare, "This is My beloved Son, in whom is my delight" (Matt 3:17). The answered prayers of the Messiah would be public vindication of his relationship to the Father.

But here in Psalm 22, Jesus cries, "Far from my deliverance (*yeshuah*), you do not answer, there is no rest for me." The word "deliverance" is the very name *Yeshuah*, which is Jesus' name. But his name had become a mockery. He was forsaken. And it was not a partial but a total forsaking ("far"); it was not temporary, but absolute ("day and night").

Have you ever felt that the presence of God had departed from you? I have at times. I have languished as the warm rays of his love seemed to withdraw behind dark clouds of despair and loneliness. When this happens, often it is due to my own sin, my own hardness of heart. Yet, because of his grace, God is never far away. Nor is the separation long-lasting. He faithfully returns again, warming me once more in the sunlight of his grace and restoring joy to my soul.

Yet while he languished on the cross, Christ, who was without sin, and who had never experienced separation from his Father, was totally abandoned by God. "Jesus struggles to find a bridge that will lead him out of his affliction and bring him back to God, whose nearness his whole existence depends, but he sees only the abyss which separates him from God," wrote one commentator (Arthur Weiser). His soul "groaned" (it roared like a lion, with a thunderous sound).

Following his cry of lament, Jesus next casts his thoughts back to the past, to the faith of the fathers.

## II. Confidence from Israel's Past (22:3-5)

Yet You are holy,  
 O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel.  
 In You our fathers trusted;  
 They trusted, and You delivered them.  
 To You they cried out, and were delivered;  
 In You they trusted, and were not ashamed.

### (a) The Faith of Our Fathers

The word "trust," which is used three times here, means to give God one's full weight. The word is used of a nursing infant lying limp at his mother's breast. This figure describes how the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua and David, had learned how to "trust" God in their hour of need. And God had answered them. He had made their faces radiant; they were not put to shame. Abraham saw the land. Moses was rescued from Egypt. Joseph was saved out of prison. Joshua conquered the Canaanites. David was saved from Saul. Thus Jesus gains confidence as he remembers the past.

Remembering a second fact gives him added confidence.

### (b) The God of Our Fathers

Jesus remembers that God was the God of the fathers. Gazing up into heaven, Jesus saw the throne of God buoyed by the ascending praises of the nation in response to answered prayer as the Jews paid tribute to God's sovereignty.

But this is a far cry from what he sees in his present terrible circumstances.

## III. Lament from Present Experience (22:6-8)

But I am a worm, and not a man,  
 A reproach of mankind, 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."

### (a) The New Adam is a Worm

How tragic this is! Jesus was supposed to be the representative man, the new Adam, the one who would create the new human race. But, says the Savior, "I am a worm and not a man." He describes himself as a worm, a reproach of mankind, despised by the people. Jesus was referring to that despicable invertebrate of hell itself, crimson in color, that devours the dead (Isa 14:11; 66:24); the worm that the prophet Jonah despised because it ate the plant that provided shade for him (Jonah 4:7).

Second, says Jesus, even the title "Messiah" was a mockery.

### (b) Messiah is a Mockery

The fathers prayed to God, without fear of shame. But Messiah was hanging on a cross, naked, exposed to shame and wagging tongue. Matthew described in his gospel the terrible scene:

And those who were passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, "You who destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." In the same way the chief priests, along with scribes and elders, were mocking him, and saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we shall believe in Him. He trusts in God; let Him deliver Him now, if he takes pleasure in Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" (Matt 27:39-43)

Bystanders mocked the very words uttered by God at Jesus' baptism. The new Adam was a worm; the name Messiah was a mockery.

But once more Jesus' flees his present terror. He gazes back again to the past to restore his confidence. This time he draws from his own personal experience.

#### IV. Confidence from Personal Past (22:9-11)

Yet You are the One who brought me forth from the womb;  
 You made me trust when upon my mother's breasts.  
 Upon You I was cast from the womb;  
 You have been my God from my mother's womb.  
 Be not far from me, for trouble is near;  
 For there is none to help.

##### (a) The Faith of Christ

God was no casual acquaintance to Jesus. Trust was inculcated in him as he lay upon his mother's breast. God brought him forth, and at that moment, as he learned to give his mother his full weight, God had taught him to trust absolutely. So he learned trust from the womb, and trust had been his hallmark all of his life.

##### (b) The God of Christ

From that moment, God became Jesus' personal God. Jesus trusted him to escape crowds in Nazareth; to bring bread from heaven; to heal the leper; to give sight to the blind; to turn water into wine; to raise Lazarus from the dead; to confront the Pharisees. In all these things, God had been his God.

But now trouble was near and there was no one to help. Judas, the betrayer, was possessed by the devil himself. Despite its many competing sects, the nation of Israel was now united for this act of infamy. The Romans, the cruel conquerors who had invented death by crucifixion, would not help him. God was far from him. There was no one to help.

How very different was David's experience! When trouble was near for him in the wilderness, God sent Jonathan, the king's son, who signed his own death warrant in a covenantal kiss of loyalty. As these two men wept together they drew strength from each other. But there was no one to help Jesus in his time of trial. Even his disciples slept while he prayed. The only kiss he received was the kiss of betrayal from the one who had been his friend. "Will you leave too?" is Jesus' plaintive and desperate cry to his Father as he faces his own death.

All he had known from his past was trust in his Father. But now trouble was near, and his Father was far away.

Now we come to Jesus' final lament, given in verses 11-18. Here we find a cycle that is repeated, while the center line, verse 15, forms new theology which is birthed in the soul of the Savior.

#### V. Lament from Present Experience (22:11-18)

Many bulls have surrounded me;  
 Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled me.  
 They open wide their mouth at me,  
 As a ravening and a roaring lion.  
 I am poured out like water,  
 And all my bones are out of joint;  
 My heart is like wax;  
 It is melted within me.  
 My strength is dried up like a potsherd,  
 And my tongue cleaves to my jaws;  
 But 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.  
 I can count all my bones.  
 They look, they stare at me;

They divide my garments among them,  
 And for my clothing they cast lots.

##### (a) The Created Order is Upside-down

The imagery of wild animals is significant here. Notice in this scene that the created order is upside-down. Jesus is surrounded by wild beasts—"unclean, murderous, ravenous, irresistible" (Derek Kidner). In the Garden of Eden, of course, man was commissioned by God to rule the animals. God ruled man, and man ruled the animals. This was to be the order of things. But in Genesis 3, the created order was turned upside-down by the devil. He used a snake, one of the lowest forms of created life, to subvert man's rule. Scripture, however, went on to predict that Israel would be the new humanity. That nation would return things to God's original plan.

The book of Daniel specifically uses imagery of animals, declaring that one like the "Son of Man" would rule the nations, which are depicted as wild beasts. The new man, who would come from Israel, would rule the animal world (the nations) just as the prophet Daniel himself ruled in the lion's den—because God was with him. Through prayer, Daniel, representing the new humanity, conquered and ruled. "Son of Man" is the title Jesus chose for himself. He would rule the nations (the "wild beasts") through prayer. But on the cross, instead of ruling the wild animals, he is surrounded by them and delivered over to them. Everything has been turned upside-down again. Jesus is terrified. His heart melts at the sight of them.

And the moral order is out of control.

##### (b) The Moral Order is Pushed Beyond the Brink

In the first cycle, the ravenous bulls surround Jesus. They are ready to devour him. In the second cycle, they are still surrounding him, but this time they do with him as they please. They "pierce his hands and feet." As conquerors, they divide as spoil his garment, his only possession. The fathers placed their trust in God and they were not ashamed. But when Jesus entrusted himself, he was handed over to abuse and shame.

The impact of this on his soul is revealed in his words, "I am poured out like water." The One who was supposed to be endowed with so much spirit and life that he would pour it out among the nations, bringing healing, now says, "I am poured out like water. I am so spent I can't move. I can barely speak."

Worse still, "I can count all my bones," says the suffering Savior. This word "count" was used by the king when he recounted praise for God's faithfulness in answered prayer. But here Jesus says that God has waited so long to answer him, and he is so emaciated, he can count all his bones. He has a starved look about him that is terrible to behold. Truly, Jesus "despised the shame."

But in the midst of this frightful suffering a new theology is born.

##### (c) The Birth of New Theology

This brings us to the center line, found in Jesus' words, "But You lay me in the dust of death." This juxtaposition of the theology of the past and the terror of present, gives birth to new thinking in his mind. In contrast to the past, when God would spare the king from death, now he will lay Jesus "in the dust of death." The fathers saw heaven, and God gave them seed and material blessings. They were vindicated; they had life here on earth. But Jesus would experience no justification or reward in this life. He had no seed, no family, no friends, no home. For him, vindication would come later. Thus, the new theology: *His vindication would come in the resurrection.* As the

past and the present coalesced, resulting in his traumatic labor pains, the new vision of resurrection was birthed in the soul of Jesus.

How our view of God can change in a moment! In *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis wrote,

My idea of God is not a Divine idea, it has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the Great Iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? The incarnation is the supreme example: it leaves all previous ideas regarding the Messiah in ruins.

Job had no neat categories to explain the terrible sufferings which traumatized his soul. But not so his three friends. They were always ready and willing to apply their limited theology to provide answers for him. They were orthodox, but they did not have the whole truth. The result was that his misguided friends caused Job more pain than the devil himself.

Let us be on our guard. If we are unwilling to allow God to shatter our neat theological categories, we will be like Job's three friends: we will cease growing, and we will inflict more pain than the devil can inflict. On the cross, Jesus allowed his categories to change. We must do the same.

This was why the Savior made a new petition, one that is not found in most other lament psalms.

## VI. A New Petition (22:19-21)

**But You, O LORD, be not far off;  
O You my help, hasten to my assistance.  
Deliver my soul from the sword,  
My life from the power of the dog.  
Save me from the lion's mouth;  
And from the horns of the wild oxen hear me.**

### (a) The Old Form of Petition

The psalms of lament had a three-fold petition: "God, be near; save me; and punish my enemies."

### (b) The New Petition

In this new petition, Jesus prays the first two parts of the ancient prayer of petition: "God, be my help, and save me" ("Deliver my soul from the sword.") But the sword was thrust into his side, wasn't it? Yes, but Jesus' vindication came at the point of his death. Only those who loved him were allowed to touch his body before it was placed in a virgin tomb. And his vindication continued in his resurrection and ascension.

Notice that Jesus does not utter the third part of the usual petition. What made his petition new was the fact that he did not seek punishment for his enemies. On the contrary, while he was on the cross, he petitioned, "Father, forgive them." The new order of pain (the Atonement) brought a new level of grace and petition.

The year after we lost our son we lost another child, this time a daughter. In our first loss, everything was unexpected. But the second time, just one medical test evoked a whole array of agonizing memories. We knew what was coming. The pain was so great I could hardly bring myself to enter into it, so I shut down emotionally. When Jesus uttered the words, "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*" he knew ahead of time everything that was going to happen. Yet he did not

shut down. He pressed on, through the pain, to forgive us. On his way to the cross, conscious of the magnitude of the pain he would suffer, he told the women of Jerusalem to weep not for him but for themselves. Then on the cross, he cried, "Father, forgive them." He called out "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*" so that you and I will never have to experience the sense of abandonment that he had to endure.

The great preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said of the wounds of Christ, "Christ's five wounds kill my suspicions and fears. A crucified Savior is the life of faith and the death of unbelief. Can you view the flowing of the Savior's precious blood upon the tree of doom and not trust him? What more can he do to prove his sincerity than to die for us? His life is the mirror of love, but in his death the sun shines on it with a blaze of glory."

This then is the Diary of the Holy One, Jesus of Nazareth, our Messiah. It is the diary of a faith that was tested to the breaking point and then perfected. It is the diary of a faith that had integrity, that built its confidence on the petitions of the past, and then allowed itself to resonate with the trauma of the present, giving birth to a new vision of the future.

In *Diary of An Old Soul*, I drew great comfort when George Macdonald bared his soul over the loss of his son and daughter. How much more should we appreciate and draw comfort from the fact that Jesus has bared his soul about his suffering! Writing about the events of the cross, Macdonald said,

"Father, let this cup pass." He prayed—was heard.  
What cup was it that passed away from him?  
Sure not the death-cup, now filled to the brim!  
There was no quailing in the awful word;  
He still was King of kings, of lords the Lord—  
He feared lest, in the suffering waste and grim,  
His faith might grow too faint and sickly dim.

Thy mind, my Master, I will dare explore;  
What we are told, that we are meant to know.  
Into thy soul I search yet more and more,  
Led by the lamp of my desire and woe.  
If thee, my Lord, I may not understand,  
I am a wanderer in a houseless land,  
A weeping thirst by hot winds ever fanned.

Therefore I look again—and think I see  
That, when at last he did cry out, "My God,  
Why hast thou forsaken me?" straight man's rod  
Was turned aside; for, that same moment, he  
Cried "Father!" and gave up will and breath and spirit  
Into his hands whose all he did inherit—  
Delivered, glorified eternally.

Let us not allow this divine concerto of anguish to be played in silence. Let us fall on our knees in appreciation for this Diary of The Holy One.

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