

Songs of the Crucified One: The Psalms and the Crucifixion

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Songs, of all descriptions, have an amazingly powerful ability to lodge their words and music in our minds. Few of us are far, for any length of time, from radios, televisions, DVDs, iPods, or mp3s, repetitively churning out the latest hit or the classic favorite. Whether in our homes, in shopping malls or on public transport, we are surrounded by music. The consequence is that many can easily drop into singing a song whether or not they have intentionally learned it. The memory of songs learned decades ago can be triggered by the slightest hint and easily come to mind to be quoted or sung accurately. Would that Christians knew the words of Scripture as confidently as they can repeat the songs of the world!

The world of Jesus' day was, of course, different and lacked the ability to broadcast and electronically reproduce its music. Yet, for all that, the songs of Israel exercised a remarkably powerful influence on the minds of Jesus and his disciples and, as today, they resorted to quoting or alluding to the songs very easily. In their case, the songs were the Psalms, often spoken of as the hymnbook of the second temple. Sabbath by Sabbath the Psalms were read in the synagogues, so that either every Psalm was read within the year or every Psalm read on a three-year cycle. There is evidence for both approaches.¹ Regularly, the doxologies at the end of each book within the Psalms (41:13; 72:19; 89:52; 106:48 and 150:6) were used in worship. Attendance at the great

festivals in Jerusalem would have added to these routine experiences. The pilgrim band sang the Psalms as they made their way to the Holy City, and pilgrims heard them performed chorally (and joined in the performances) in the temple itself. No wonder the words of the Psalms exercised a "great influence on the hearts and minds of religious people."² The Psalms, too, might not only have had a role in the worship life of Israel but in its instruction to the faithful as well.³

In the light of this it is not surprising that the Psalms surface in the Gospels with twenty-three identifiable, direct quotations,⁴ several of which specifically relate to the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ. But these quotations are more than happy, or perhaps more accurately unhappy, coincidences or convenient sound bites. Jesus saw them as prophecies of his crucifixion and he saw himself as bringing these old covenant songs to fulfilment in the new. We know this because after the resurrection he said to his disciples, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms" (Luke 22:44).⁵ They were messianic predictions of his cross.⁶

Usually only the briefest quotations—a single verse or less—find their way into the Gospel accounts. But, given the cultural context, such short extracts may justifiably suggest that more than the limited quotation was in mind and that the extract

might legitimately serve as a window onto the wider vista of the Psalm. James Mays, for example, argues in reference to Jesus quoting Psalm 22:1 that, “it is not just the opening words that are involved. Citing the first words of a text was, in the tradition of the time, a way of identifying the entire passage.”⁷ So, although we cannot be dogmatic about such an issue, we may reasonably review not just the discrete quotation but also its context to shed light on the crucifixion.

What, then, can we learn if we view the cross through the lens of the Psalms? What do the “Songs of the Crucified One” reveal concerning his suffering and death?⁸ We shall trace the songs in reference to the way the events of the crucifixion unfolded, in so far as we can tell.

The Song of Betrayal

Psalm 41:9, “Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread has lifted up his heel against me,” is quoted by Jesus at the last supper in the Upper Room. It is cited in John 13:18⁹ and alluded to in Matt 26:23, Mark 14:20, and Luke 22:21. Psalm 55:12-15 similarly voices the horror that a “companion” and “close friend” is unmasked as the source of betrayal that leads to an innocent person suffering.

Psalm 41 is a chiastic structure and may be understood as follows:

- a The mercy of God as Saviour (vv. 1-3)
- b Prayer for mercy (v. 4)
- c Lament concerning opponents (vv. 5-9)
- b¹ Prayer for mercy (v. 10)
- a¹ The mercy of God as restorer (vv. 11-13)

The Victim's Suffering

The structure draws the eye to the middle section that dwells on the sense of

betrayal felt by the Psalmist. The heading claims it as a “Psalm of David,” but it cannot be placed easily into an episode of his life. Yet, as John Goldingay has recently written, “in general one can imagine David testifying to Yhwh’s deliverance along these lines; one can also imagine subsequent kings using it.”¹⁰ Indeed, the words might well be imagined as falling from the lips of Job or other righteous sufferers. Yet, as Calvin claims, “certainly we ought to understand that, although David speaks of himself in this psalm, yet he speaks not as a common and private person, but as one who represented the person of Christ, inasmuch as ... it was necessary that what was begun in David should be fully accomplished in Christ.”¹¹

The suffering emanates from two sources, in verses 5-9. First, there is the suffering initiated by enemies (vv. 5-8) and then the suffering initiated by a close friend (v. 9). The suffering initiated by enemies fits the experience of Jesus no less than that initiated by Judas the betrayer. Just as the Psalm in its original setting refers to the rejection of God’s appointed ruler, so when Jesus entered the world as God’s emissary, so too he was rejected by the very people who should have welcomed him (John 1:11). Particular phrases in Psalm 41 match the hostility Jesus faced throughout his life. Verse 5 discloses that the king’s enemies could not wait to dispose of him. Impatiently they cry, “When will he die and his name perish?” So the crowds and the rulers demonstrated an equally impatient desire to dispose of Christ as a troublemaker and disturber of the peace (e.g., Luke 4: 29; John 10:31; 11:50). The phrases of verse 6—“speak falsely ... gather slander ... spread it abroad”—point forward to the mountain

of criticism and accusation Jesus would face. He was “demon-possessed” (John 8:48), a “sinner” (John 9:24) a speaker of “blasphemy” (John 10:33) and a political insurrectionist (John 18:28-40) as well. Then the Psalm enters a note of misplaced diagnosis. The psalmist is said to be ill because “a vile disease has beset him,” according to verse 8. The “vile disease,” literally translated, is “a thing of Belial” suggesting, as Craigie puts it, “a devilish disease.”¹² Although the original meaning is somewhat obscure and may have meant that the Psalmist’s illness was as a result of a curse, it reminds one of the accusations subsequently faced by Jesus that he was demon-possessed (e.g., Matt. 9:34; 12:24; John 8:48). The leaders of Israel completely misunderstood the origin of the one who stood before them doing good and bringing wholeness to broken lives.

In addition to general opposition the Psalm particularly mentions the betrayal of “my close friend (lit. “a man of peace”), someone I trusted, one who shared my bread” (v. 9). Jesus quotes this phrase in reference to Judas Iscariot, who has been described as “the most famous traitor in history.” Little is known of Judas. The description “Iscariot” most likely alludes to his coming from Kerioth in Moab, but could possibly indicate he came from Issachar or possibly even signify he was “an assassin.”¹³ The portrait of Judas in the Gospels is far from flattering. His name constantly comes at the end of the list of disciples, perhaps indicating a subsequent negative evaluation of him. But, as treasurer of the disciples, it was known that he was a thief (John 12:6). Yet, these are retrospective judgments on him. At the time, it was clear from the reaction to Jesus’ announcement at the Last Supper that someone around the table would shortly

betray him, that his fellow disciples did not suspect him (John 13:22).

A great deal of interest has been shown in Judas Iscariot recently, not least because of the so-called “gospel of Judas,” and various imaginative conspiracy theories, which have sought to rehabilitate him.¹⁴ Some argue that his motives in betraying Jesus were good, not greed. In doing so, Judas was seeking to force Jesus’ hand to advance openly his kingdom and had not anticipated that it would end in Jesus’ death. But such interpretations are speculative at best and fanciful at worst. The Gospels credit him with other motives and ultimately attribute his action to the work of the devil (John 6:70), even while never absolving him of the human responsibility for his decisions. What is more, we must never forget that all this happens under the sovereignty of God who uses such human treachery and demonically-inspired action to accomplish his good will and salvation plan.

The treachery was deep because sharing bread together in the culture of Jesus’ day signified intimacy, trust, and genuine friendship. It is described in the Psalm as an act whereby the close friend has “lifted up his heel against me,” words that are reiterated by Jesus. The allusion goes back to Gen 3:15, and according to E. F. F. Bishop signifies, “a revelation of contempt, treachery, even animosity” which suggests that “in his inmost attitudes he really despised his Master.”¹⁵ The betrayal was no last minute, spontaneous, chance decision, but the outworking of a deep loathing.

The Victim’s Prayers

Psalm 41 is not limited to describing the innocent sufferer’s opponents. It also records the persecuted man’s prayers in

verses 4 and 10. He cries out for God to “have mercy.” One cannot read these cries without thinking of Jesus crying out in Gethsemane for God to remove the cup of suffering from him (Matt 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:41).

There is no difficulty in relating the prayers for mercy to the experience of Gethsemane but the second lines in each of these verses causes problems in relation to Christ. The problems may indicate that it is not right to force every element of these ancient songs to fit the death of Christ. But perhaps the quest to do so should not be given up too quickly.

In verse 4 the prayer continues, “heal me for I have sinned against you.” In what sense can that be true of Christ? In its original setting, VanGemeren speaks for many in commenting that the words are “a general confession of unwitting sins rather than betraying that he (the Psalmist) was deeply burdened by particular sins.”¹⁶ Is it stretching the point too far to acknowledge that though Jesus Christ was the sinless one who never had need to confess his own sin, he was also the one who had our sins laid on him and was made “to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21)?

The difficult line in verse 10 is problematic because it smacks of the Psalmist wishing to take revenge on his enemies and many readers cannot square that with what they know of Christ or of New Testament Christianity generally. But there are a number of answers to this. While some say the quest to repay one’s enemies reveals an old covenant understanding that is in need of fuller revelation in the future,¹⁷ others propose a different solution. We are surely wrong to read this as a cry for personal revenge.

Calvin argues that this reflects David in his judicial role as King of Israel, and, if it reflects David, then it reflects Jesus Christ in that role even more.¹⁸ Might it not be true that this speaks of Jesus in his role as the eschatological judge, the one who will one day rule in complete righteousness as described, for example, in John 5:24-30? Might not our difficulties with this line lie in our having too shallow an understanding of the role of the crucified Christ and our being too shaped by the over-tolerant age in which we live?

The Victim's God

The beginning and end of this Psalm affirm the gracious action of God who operates in grace on behalf of the victim, even when circumstances seems to suggest otherwise. So God is shown to be the saving God (vv. 1-3) who does not neglect but “delivers” the weak in times of trouble. He is the God who “protects” and “preserves” them in trouble and “sustains” and “restores” them in sickness.

The note of restoration is picked up again at the end of the Psalm (vv. 10-13). In the midst of the troubles he experiences, the Psalmist confidently asserts that God will come to his aid and he will be restored for justice (v. 10b), to life (v.11), and for relationship (v.12) with God. The experience of his merciless rejection by enemies and friends alike will be reversed when he is securely placed “in (God’s) presence for ever.” This anticipates exactly what Heb 11:2 affirms: “For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Psalm 41 sets before us two ways: the way of Judas and the way of Jesus. The way of Judas is that of greed, arrogance, and self-aggrandisement which ends in

a wretched death. The way of Jesus is the way of generosity, humility, and self-giving, that endures a wretched death but then gives way to the joy of resurrection life. It sets before us a theme that is common in the Songs of the Crucified One, that of the example of the righteous sufferer who trusts in God through it all. It also serves as a warning that the church should remain faithful, upholding the testimony of the apostles to Christ “and not join the company of Judas” by betraying the Savior.¹⁹

The Song of Desolation²⁰

Undoubtedly the best-known Psalm connected with the crucifixion is Psalm 22. It has aptly been named “the fifth gospel,” and the resonances between it and the crucifixion of Christ are numerous. Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34 record Jesus as repeating the opening verse—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—from the cross. In both cases, the cry is one of terrible desolation but it seems to weigh more heavily in Mark’s leaner, darker account of the crucifixion than it does in Matthew. Before looking at its application to Jesus we shall examine the Psalm in its own terms.

The first part of the Psalm, verses 1-21, is an individual lament. There is a marked change of tone in the second section, verses 22-31, as the psalmist voices praise in the community. But dividing the psalm into these two blunt sections does not do justice to its “finely wrought compositional design.”²¹ The truth is that the first section of the Psalm interweaves trouble with trust, despair with hope.

Trouble (vv. 1-2, 6-8, 12-18)

Three distinct forms of trouble are mentioned, beginning with the most pro-

foundly disturbing form of all, that of the absence of God. All human beings have a tendency to cry, “Why me, Lord?” when tragedy and suffering strike. But the cry of desertion expressed in verse 1 is of a deeper nature than this. The psalmist feels abandoned by God just at the point when he needs him most. All his life the psalmist had been taught to believe in a loving God who was near those who called on him. But now his experience contradicts his belief. Rather than being near, God is “so far” (v. 1) from him. His incessant crying out to God day and night makes no difference: God does not show up. There is no relief from his condition.

Even if they have no personal experience of feeling deserted by God, pastors soon encounter many who have. It is not uncommon for high profile Christian leaders to endure periods of such abandonment. The silence of God can appear to be most unyielding at the precise time when we most urgently need him to speak to us.

The psalmist’s trouble is compounded because added to the absence of God there is the all-too-real presence of enemies. Verses 6-8 provide an intense account of the derision heaped upon the sufferer. What hurts most is that they mock him for having been apparently abandoned by God. Verse 8 indicates that the things the sufferer had most passionately believed and preached are now hurled back in his face. The net effect is to leave the sufferer feeling more of a worm than a human being (v. 6).

This leads to the third form of trouble: that of self-pity, mentioned in verses 12-18. His tormentors hide behind animal masks. They come at him like the bulls of Bashan, which were well known for their size. They tear at him as if they were lions

devouring their prey. They trap him like snarling dogs. "The words," writes Peter Craigie, "evoke the abject terror of one who is powerless, but surrounded, with no avenue of escape."²² At last he gives free rein to his feelings. He is a bag of useless bones, ready to be laid to rest. Others have decided that his life is over, so they parcel out his clothes since he has no further use for them. He has no strength to resist. He is physically drained, socially isolated, emotionally scarred and spiritually bereft. Life is spent and shattered.

Trust (vv. 3-5, 9-11, 19-21)

In spite of the terrifying experiences and the profound questions of faith that arise as a result, the psalmist is not prepared to abandon his God. The flame of faith continues to flicker, sometimes bursting into bright light in the midst of darkness. Faith jostles with perplexity. Trust wrestles with the questions. So wonderful affirmations about God are woven into the expression of abject terror. The absent God is described in the most personal of terms. The absent God remains "My God."

The psalmist asserts *God's position* (v. 3). He is "enthroned as the Holy One." He is still sovereign in his universe and has not been overthrown by other gods. He asserts *God's power* (vv. 4-5). He evokes the memory of the Exodus when Israel trusted God and was delivered from oppression, against all apparent odds. He asserts *God's purpose* for his life (v. 9). His birth was not the result of merely human wills, still less of blind chance. God brought him out of the womb and gave him security. He asserts *God's providence* (vv. 10-11). As he reflects on life he recalls the times when he was cast on God and God came to his aid. So, now, he trusts in *God's promise*

(vv.19-21) and prays in the belief that God will hear and rescue him again. He seeks not to forget in the dark what he knew of God in the light.

Walter Brueggemann has pointed out that what he calls the "core testimony" of Israel's faith is constantly arguing with "counter testimony" of her experience.²³ Counter testimony is not afraid to face the raw reality of life. It does not take false refuge in a Disney-like view of faith, denying the harsh contradictions we encounter and pretending that all is well when it patently is not. Part of the glory of scripture is its integrity. It deals with "life as it comes, (which) along with joys, is beset by hurt, betrayal, loneliness, disease, threat, anxiety, bewilderment, anger, hatred and anguish."²⁴ The Psalm does not tell us how the tension between the core and the counter testimony of our lives are to be resolved. Only the cross does that.

Thanksgiving (vv. 22-31)

No hint is given as to why the Psalm dramatically changes direction from verse 22 onward and concludes on such a positive note of thanksgiving. We are jolted from a preoccupation with introspective musings and catapulted into a "great assembly" (v. 25) of worshippers where the psalmist's deliverance from trouble is celebrated. Having been rescued he keeps his vow (v. 25) to give thanks to God. Verse 26 suggests he does so not merely through song and words but also by a peace or fellowship offering in which even the poor would join "and be satisfied."²⁵ The vow gives way to a far-sighted vision. The sufferer who felt deserted now looks forward to the day when geographically ("all the ends of the earth," v. 27), socially ("all the rich," v. 29), and eschatologically ("future

generations," v. 30) the Lord's name will be universally praised. In this respect the Psalm anticipates Phil 2:10-11 and the vision of Revelation 5.

Application to Christ

The Psalm fits the experience of Jesus on the cross like a well-fitting glove. Numerous references point to the cross. The taunts he endured (vv. 7-8), the thirst he experienced (v. 15), the piercing of hands and feet (v. 16), and the dividing of his clothes (v. 18) are remarkably prescient details of crucifixion.²⁶ But we leave these details on one side for the moment to focus on the cry of dereliction in verse 1, which is repeated by Jesus on the cross.

Throughout his life, Jesus had enjoyed an intimate and uninterrupted relationship with his Father, but now, at the hours of his greatest need, his Father appears to be unresponsive to him. Jesus experienced the hiddenness of God more than any other human being. Why so? Some argue that the cry of desertion is merely the understandable expression of emotional vulnerability. How can it be, they argue, that the eternal relations of the Trinity are ruptured? But though such an argument is understandable it is surely not enough. And though alternative explanations leave one with mysteries, does that rule them out? Surely the abandonment is due to the fact that Christ was made "sin for us" (2 Cor 5:21) and that God, whose "eyes are too pure to look on evil" (Hab 1:13) had to abandon his Son at the time in which he was bearing our sin.

The cross holds the secret for reconciling the tension of core and counter testimony. It is, as Luther taught us, that God reveals himself in his hiddenness of the cross. By the Father and Son acting harmoniously together leading to the mani-

fest abandonment of the Son, the Father reveals his love and effects salvation for sinners. "The God with whom we are dealing" writes Alister McGrath, "the God who addresses us from the cross—to use Luther's breathtakingly daring phrase—is 'the crucified and hidden God.'"²⁷

If, by quoting verse 1, Jesus had in mind the entire Psalm, then we see how it points not only to his desertion by God but his subsequent deliverance in the resurrection too. Jesus' words, then, would not only have been the genuinely anguished cry of an abandoned Son but the genuinely hopeful cry of a trusting Son. Abandonment now would lead to discovery that God "has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help" (v. 24), and the suffering and scorn that have been endured leads to the sufferer being vindicated and a growing crescendo of praise to God. The final words of the Psalm emphasize that God, far from being unreliable, has proved faithful in all his actions.

The Songs of Execution

Three times John's account of the crucifixion speaks in terms of the scripture being fulfilled (John 19:24, 28, and 36) and each time it cites a verse from a Psalm as evidence. Here, through the lens of John and looking backwards rather than forwards, as we have been doing, we investigate the quotations and the details of the crucifixion they highlight. A superficial reading of the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion appears to suggest they are merely reporting what happened without theological comment. But it is in their choice of details and the manner in which those details are reported that their interpretation of the cross and its atoning significance lies.

A Seamless Robe (Ps 22:18 and John 19:23-24)

Crucifixion was a method of execution invented by barbarians and the Persians. It became widespread under Rome and was inflicted on the slaves, the lower classes, and the seditious. It was designed to be barbarically cruel but also extremely humiliating. The Roman ritual of crucifixion involved the condemned person being tortured before being crucified, paraded through the streets bearing the cross beam on which he was to be pinioned, stripped naked and, with outstretched arms, nailed through a variety of body parts and left to die, exposed to the jeers of the crowd and the elements of the weather.²⁸ The Gospels report the death of Jesus as discreetly as possible but in a manner consistent with what we know of crucifixion elsewhere.

Part of the ritual was the stripping of the condemned man of his clothes at the site of execution so that the process of stripping him of his liberty, rights, possessions, dignity was complete. It was common practice that the execution squad, probably four of them, should keep the condemned man's clothes. John tells us that the squaddies, as Psalm 22:18 had predicted, had divided the garments into four but that they then were left with a seamless tunic. The four garments were probably Jesus' sandals, belt, outer garment, and headdress. What was left was the tunic, which the NIV and TNIV, perhaps less than happily, translate as "the undergarment." Don Carson explains that this *chiton*, even though worn next to the skin was more like a suit than contemporary underwear.²⁹

The real question, however, arises out of the comment that this garment was "seamless." What is the significance of

that? Several explanations have been advanced.³⁰ Though some have put forward the idea that the garment was that of a rich person, this seems not to be supported by the evidence. Others, on the basis of a remark by Josephus who says the High Priest's robe was "woven from a single thread," think it points to the priestly ministry of Christ. But there is a difference between the High Priest's outer garment and the one in view here. Furthermore, John shows "no interest in a High Priestly typology elsewhere."³¹ Rather, it would seem, that the garment was that of an ordinary person. Its significance must be sought elsewhere.

Daly-Denton³² draws attention to the way in which Samuel tore Saul's robe once his kingship had been rejected by God (1 Sam15:27-28). The prophecy predicted that the kingdom of Israel would be given to "one better" than Saul. She also points out how Ahijah tore a cloak into twelve pieces to symbolise the division of the kingdom under Jereboam (1 Kgs 11:29-31). If this is relevant, the significance lies in Christ reasserting God's kingship over his people. In addition, the significance lies not so much in that the garment was seamless, as in the fact that, being seamless, it was not torn into pieces. The cross of Christ overcomes divisions, uniting and reconciling warring parties.

Carson believes the interpretation that has most merit is one that ties John 19:23-24 to John 13:1-17, where Jesus "took off his outer clothing" to wash his disciples' feet.³³ If this is the explanation, then the significance of the symbolism lies in his voluntarily self-humbling and his acceptance of the status of a servant. The crucifixion takes this to its ultimate conclusion and there laying aside his glory, epitomized by the laying aside

of his clothes, Jesus humbles himself “becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). Paradoxically this way of shame, disgrace, weakness and humiliation is the means by which God has chosen to rescue the world, delivering men and women from their sin and re-establishing his rule over all.

*A Quenched Thirst, Ps 69:21
(Ps 22:15) and John 19:28-30*

Anyone who underwent the process of crucifixion was very soon likely to become dehydrated. Even if they had not reached that point before, being suspended in the mid-day Middle Eastern sun would quickly ensure the condemned person would suffer intolerable thirst. I remember the consequences of dehydration when visiting Ephesus one summer noontime a few years ago, and that was without going through what a crucified man would have endured!

On arrival at Golgotha, Jesus was offered “wine mixed with myrrh” (Mark 15:23), possibly as an act of kindness to deaden his pain, but Jesus “did not take it.” Having been nailed to the cross, however, and knowing that the end was very near, he cried, “I am thirsty.” On this occasion he drank the coarse soldier’s wine that was offered to him in fulfilment of the prophecy of Ps 69:21. Contrary to many an artist’s impression, the cross need not have been very high, yet they offered him the drink via a sponge placed “on a stalk of the hyssop plant.” This detail connects his death with the Passover meal.

In an attempt to discern the theological motif that might be implicit in this saying, Daly-Denton sees it as a metaphor for a deep longing for God, in line with Ps 43:2 or 63:1.³⁴ This, she claims, is “in keeping with John’s theological schema.”

While I do not seek to deny this, for the motif of Christ returning to his Father is evident in John, such a view seems to miss the more obvious motif in John’s Gospel whereby Jesus is revealed as the great thirst quencher. To a spiritually, relationally, and emotionally parched woman from Samaria he promises living water. Pointing to Sychar’s well, he claimed that those who drank its water would thirst again, “but those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). The theme is repeated when Jesus visits the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7:1-52), in which the water ritual that symbolised the Messianic hopes of Israel were so central. Jesus claims to be the fulfilment of their longings and invites all who were thirsty to come to him and drink (John 4:37).

The one who quenched the thirst of others now hangs in desolation and agony, epitomized, as Beasley-Murray puts it, by his own thirst.³⁵ Is this not the path the thirst-quencher must inevitably travel? Tom Smail helpfully explains,

Christ comes to the cross as the fireman comes to the fire, as the lifeboat comes to the sinking ship, as the rescue team comes to the wounded man in the alpine snow. They have what it takes to help and deliver, but they must come to where the fire burns, the storm rages, the avalanche entombs and make themselves vulnerable to the danger that coming involves. So Christ on the cross comes to where the Father in his holy wrath has handed over the sinners to the consequences of their sin.³⁶

So, he must absorb the dehydration of others in his own being if he is to quench their thirst; just as he carries our sin to free us from sin, accepts our punishment

to release us from sin's penalty, pays our debt to discharge us from debt, and undergoes our death to deliver us from death.

True though this may be, such an explanation does not go far enough. In Gethsemane, Jesus declared his intention to drink the cup the Father had given him (John 18:11). Yet he recognized the horror of what he was being asked to do and, according to the synoptic accounts, asked the Father, if possible, to remove the cup from him (Matt 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). The cup, to which allusion had already been made in conversation with his disciples (Mark 10:38), was evidently not a pleasant drink. Indeed, the allusions must be to the cup of God's wrath and judgment against wickedness, spoken of in Isa 51:17, 22, and Jer 25:15. Jesus was to drink the cup to its dregs, experiencing in full the wrath of God on a sinful humanity. By freely drinking it himself, he releases those who take refuge in him from ever having to do so.

Jesus can still quench the dryness of the most thirsting individual because he has entered into the most barren of all experiences on the cross, and endured the pain himself as a victim of extreme thirst.

The Unbroken Bones (Ps 34:20 and John 19:3)

The third fulfillment to which John draws attention comes from Ps 34:20 where the psalmist affirms God's providential care for the righteous and asserts that God delivers them "and protects all their bones, not one of them will be broken."³⁷ Within the context of the Psalm, the claim of God's protection might be said to be "extravagant"³⁸ but in the light of the crucifixion of Jesus it might be said to be remarkably prophetic.

Using a mallet to break the legs "was a customary procedure in the crucifixion of criminals."³⁹ Its original purpose may have been to add to the barbarity of the punishment but the truth is that it was often a merciful act because it hastened the death of the condemned one.⁴⁰ In Jesus' case there was an added reason for breaking his legs and those of his fellow sufferers because "the next Day was to be a special Sabbath (and) the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath" (John 19:31). But when they came to Jesus they discovered he was already dead and so "they did not break his legs" (John 19:34). To verify (or ensure) the death was real, however, a spear was thrust into the body resulting in "a flow of blood and water" (John 19:35).

Without setting aside the opinion that the song being sung is Ps 34:20, it is obvious from the context that the reference to Jesus' bones not being broken is meant to connect the death of Jesus to the death of the Passover Lamb. Exodus 12:46 and Num 9:12 both given the instruction that the bones of the Passover Lamb were not to be broken. John lit the fuse of the Passover theme as far back as 1:29 and 36.⁴¹ And as the cross approaches so he increasingly intrudes the presence of the Passover into the story. In 13:1 he says, "Just before the Passover Feast, Jesus knew that his hour had come for him to leave the world." The verdict at Jesus' trial was pronounced on "the Day of Preparation for the Passover" (John 19:14). George Beasley-Murray points out the significance of this:

The place, the day, and the hour are all mentioned, for the Evangelist is conscious of the momentous nature of the event now taking place It is the sixth hour (noon) of the Prepara-

tion Day; at this hour three things take place: Jews cease their work, leaven is gathered out of the houses and burned, and the slaughtering of the Passover lambs commences. The Passover festival, for all practical purposes begins.⁴²

John's chronology is no accident. Nor is the mention of hyssop as the stalk on which Jesus was offered a sponge of wine vinegar. It is in an interesting detail that further connects the story with the Passover ritual (cf. John 19:29 and Exod 12:22). The approach of the special Sabbath, which had encouraged the soldiers to speed the deaths of the condemned, further reinforces the fact that Passover is firmly in view. So, it becomes inescapable that, in John's eyes, Jesus is the Passover Lamb whose death will secure the liberation from their enemies (to wit: sin, the law, Satan, death, and judgement) of Jew and Gentile alike, just as surely as the Passover Lamb sacrificed centuries in Egypt before had secured Israel's liberation of Israel from Pharaoh.

John's quotations from the Psalms establish Jesus as the humbled deity who stooped to save, the thirst quencher who thirsts himself to renew life, and the Passover Lamb who dies to remove sin.

The Song of Trust

The song of the Crucified One that Luke recalls is found in Ps 31:5. His account of the crucifixion differs significantly, of course from John's, but also in a number of respects from that of Matthew and Mark. The actual crucifixion is briefly told. What is striking is Jesus' concern for those around him. He tells the women of Jerusalem not to weep for him but for themselves (Luke 23:28). He prays to the Father that the execution squad (and probably the multitude who stand behind

them in the story) might be forgiven (Luke 23:34). He assures the dying, but repentant, thief that they would see each other in Paradise that very day (Luke 23:43). Throughout, in line with Luke's general portrait, Jesus is presented as a compassionate Savior.

A second impressive feature of Luke is that he presents Jesus as a trusting Son. Matthew and Mark presented him as a rejected Son. They recorded him as singing the song of desolation, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Psalm 22:1). But this cry is absent in Luke, replaced instead by the song of quiet trust, from Psalm 31, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Perhaps, as some have suggested, Luke makes explicit the silent cry referred to by Matthew (27:50) and Mark (15:37). Even if this is true, the fact that they do not provide us the words gives their account an altogether different colour. There need be no contradiction between the two sayings. Relationships are complex and multi-layered. They move swiftly from one form to another. It is easily conceivable that Jesus should have felt that his Father had both deserted him and yet was worthy of trust at the same time.

Donald Senior has insightfully commented that when we face crises "shallow relationships fall away (and) the true values of our deepest soul well up to the surface, and the rare treasures of life and fidelity stand out luminously."⁴³ So it is that when the crisis breaks, Jesus reveals the quality of relationship he always had with his Father by trusting him, rather than doubting him. He is sure that God would prove trustworthy and that not even his death would prove otherwise. Here is a quiet confidence that all would turn out right and life would not be

snuffed out forever.

Psalm 31 is sometimes considered to be two Psalms joined together since the themes of verses 1-8 are repeated in verses 9-24. But, as Goldingay claims, it is natural to go through things more than once and sometimes it is necessary to pray about something more than once.⁴⁴ Though lament and trust are interwoven throughout, the net effect is that we are left with “a model of prayer that is confident of being heard.”⁴⁵

The Warp of Lament

It is impossible to be precise as to the situation that lay behind the original Psalm since its language seems to indicate a number of potential threats. Life is in danger (vv. 1-3), testing is near (vv. 4-5), the soul is in anguish (vv. 6-7, especially v. 7c), the body is weak, (vv. 9-10), friends have deserted (vv. 11-13), lies are told (vv. 14-18, especially v.18), hope is holding on (vv. 19-20), and loneliness is real and rejection deeply felt (vv. 21-22). Cumulatively, like the lament of Psalm 22, the picture fits the experience of crucifixion where suffering comes, to use Shakespeare’s phrase, “in battalions.” Yet, the warp of lament lies alongside the weft of trust.

The Weft of Trust

However extreme the psalmist’s experience of suffering he cannot let go of God. The psalmist knows from a range of earlier experiences in life that God is “a rock of refuge” and “a strong fortress” (v. 2), a “crag” (“rock,” TNIV) in which to hide, and “a fastness,” as Goldingay translates “fortress” in verse 3.⁴⁶ God is a God of salvation, whose love sets our feet in a spacious place (vv. 7-8).⁴⁷ He is a God of mercy (v. 9), a personal God (v. 14), a good God (v. 19), and a protecting God (v.

23). The logical conclusion of this is that an innocent sufferer should “be strong and take heart,” continuing to hope in the Lord (v. 24).

This is the context in which the psalmist commits his spirit to his faithful God (v. 5). The commitment is reinforced by the psalmist’s parallel acknowledgement in verse 15 that “My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of my enemies, from those who pursue me.” Both verses evince a humble trust and a strong faith. The psalmist is saying to God, “I trust my life to your sovereign disposition.”⁴⁸ The sufferer does not demand, hector, or protest. He does not assert his rights or cry out for justice to be done. He leaves matters in the hands of God. It is up to God what happens to him, and the sufferer is happy that it should be so. He lives in total dependence on the God he knows. All this makes this prayer “eminently suited as the last words of the dying Saviour whose life, from beginning to end, was lived in a unique relationship with God.”⁴⁹

But these words also have implications for us. Reflecting on them, Calvin leaves us with this challenge: “To conclude, whoever relies not on the providence of God, so as to commit his life to its faithful guardianship, has not yet learned aright what it is to live.”⁵⁰

The last song sung on the cross, which is taken from the collection of Psalms, is not the lament of Psalm 22 but the expression of trust found in Psalm 34. It is appropriate that it should be so, for Jesus’ confidence in God was not disappointed. Indeed, further songs could be mentioned that lead us even more clearly to see that God vindicated his Son and led him through the cross and the grave to the resurrection. Ps 16:10 declares, “you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor

will you let your faithful one see decay,"⁵¹ while Ps 118:22-23 reminds us that, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes."⁵²

Conclusion

Indeed, "it is marvellous in our eyes." First, the "Songs of the Crucified One" testify to the exact and detailed fulfilment of messianic prophecy. Second, they lead us deeply into the state of mind of the one who, on the cross, was betrayed, yet accepting; rejected, yet trusting; tortured, yet faithful. Third, they show his ministry to be that of the reconciler, the Lamb who still takes away the sin of the world and the one who quenches the deepest thirst of our fallen humanity. The focus is all on him. As such, he is not only Lord and Savior, but he also proves to be a model of deep spirituality for those who trust him, teaching us how to trust God in the darkness.

ENDNOTES

¹J. A. Lamb, *The Psalms in Christian Worship* (London: The Faith Press, 1962): 12-15; Gerard Wilson, "The Shape of the Book of Psalms," *Interpretation*, XLVI (1992): 2, 130, n. 3 and 137f.

²Lamb, *The Psalms in Christian Worship*, 17.

³J. Clinton McCann Jr., "The Psalms as Instruction," *Interpretation* XLVI (1992): 2, 117-28.

⁴According to the list given by Dale A. Brueggemann, "The Evangelists and the Psalms," in *Interpreting the Psalms* (ed. Philip S. Johnston and David G. Firth; Leicester: Apollos, 2005), 264-66. Brueggemann identifies a further nine quotations in Acts, two of which are repetitions from the Gospels. This article is restricted to the Passion narratives in

the Gospels otherwise attention might have been paid profitably to the use of Psalm 40 in Hebrews 10:5-7.

⁵Cf. Luke 24:25-27.

⁶For a recent discussion of the interpretation of the Messianic Psalms see, Richard P. Belcher Jr., *The Messiah in the Psalms: Preaching Christ from the Psalms* (Fearn: Christian Focus Books, Mentor Imprint, 2006).

⁷James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 105. Others might take a different view, but adopting this approach opens up the wider testimony of the Psalms concerned, which when treated as a whole usually display a remarkably close fit with the crucifixion.

⁸It should be noted that a little recent scholarly work has been done in this area, but not much. See Douglas J Moo, *The Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 225-300; and Steve Moyse and Maarten J. J. Menken, ed., *The Psalms in the New Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 25-45 and 61-137.

⁹The scholarly literature rightly demonstrates particular concern with which Hebrew version of the Psalms is being quoted. That will not be our concern here but readers are referred to the literature cited above should they wish to pursue the issue.

¹⁰John Goldingay, *Psalms, Vol 1: Psalms 1-41* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 582.

¹¹John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (5 vols.; trans. James Anderson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 2:122.

¹²Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word, 1983), 318; and Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms,"

in *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (vol. 5; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 328.

¹³D. J. Williams, "Judas Iscariot" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospel* (ed. Joel B. Green, Scott McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 406.

¹⁴For a recent discussion see N. T. Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2006). See pp. 15-20 for a good defence of Judas as "a figure of history."

¹⁵Cited by George Beasley-Murray, *John* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word, 1987), 236.

¹⁶VanGemenen, "Psalms," 326.

¹⁷E.g., A. Weiser, *The Psalms* (Old Testament Library; London: SCM Press, 1962), 344.

¹⁸Calvin, *Psalms*, 123f.

¹⁹Beasley-Murray, *John*, 97.

²⁰This section is a summarised version of a longer exposition of Psalm 22 to be found in the author's *The Message of the Cross* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 85-99.

²¹Mays, *Psalms*, 108.

²²Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 200.

²³Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), part 2.

²⁴Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995), 67.

²⁵See Lev 3:1-17; 7:11-27.

²⁶Crucifixion was invented by the Persians and made much use of by the Romans. These details that fit crucifixion so well are either to be understood more loosely of other forms of suffering or encourage one to think of a late date for this Psalm. The reference to "they pierce

my hands and feet" is "an exegetical problem," VanGemenen, "Psalms," 207. It could be translated, "like lions they maul my hands and feet."

²⁷Alister McGrath, *The Enigma of the Cross* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987), 104f. See also his, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

²⁸For further details see, Martin Hengel, *The Crucifixion* (London, SCM Press, 1977).

²⁹D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 612.

³⁰The details can be found in *ibid.*, 611-15.

³¹Moo, *Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narrative*, 255f.

³²Margaret Daly-Denton, "The Psalms in John's Gospel," in *The Psalms in the New Testament*, 132f.

³³Carson, *John*, 614. The explanation falls foul of the same difficulty in relating this to the High Priest's robes. One has to accept that the outer garment shed in the Upper Room is equivalent to the inner garment shed at the cross.

³⁴Daly-Denton, "Psalms," 135. She refers to Ps 43:2 and 63:2 but I have followed the usual number system of English translations.

³⁵Beasley-Murray, *John*, 351.

³⁶Tom Smail, *Once and For All: A Confession of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998), 107.

³⁷Scholars differ over whether the allusion is primarily to Ps 34:20 or Exod 12:46 and Num 9:12. Daly-Denton points out the close linguistic parallel between John 19:36

and Ps 34:20 ("Psalms," 135), and so it might have some claim to priority. However, Moo (*Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narrative*, 314f.) favours the references to the Passover Lamb as having priority regarding these texts as closer to John's wording. I see no need to choose between them.

³⁸Goldingay, *Psalms*, 485.

³⁹Moo, *Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narrative*, 316.

⁴⁰Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John 13-21* (2 vols.; Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1970), 2:934.

⁴¹I am aware of the debate as to which Lamb John has in view in these verses but believe that, at the very least, the Passover Lamb would have been embraced by his use of the title Lamb of God. See Derek Tidball, *The Message of the Cross* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 177.

⁴²Beasley-Murray, *John*, 341.

⁴³Donald Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), 166.

⁴⁴Goldingay, *Psalms*, 437.

⁴⁵Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 365; and Mays, *Psalms*, 143.

⁴⁶Goldingay, *Psalms*, 438.

⁴⁷A spacious place is one where there is freedom. Cf. 18:19.

⁴⁸Mays, *Psalms*, 144.

⁴⁹Moo, *Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narrative*, 281.

⁵⁰Calvin, *Psalms*, 503.

⁵¹Quoted in Acts 13:35.

⁵²Quoted in Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17; and Acts 4:11.