THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

At the most climactic moment in Jesus’ life, he cried out the first words of this psalm. You must remember that (though I always forget) in those days they didn’t have chapter numbers; they didn’t have verses and numbers. They didn’t even have titles for the books. The way you referred to a book or a chapter was you quoted the first words of it. So when Jesus cried out Psalm 22 on the cross, that first verse, he was saying, “This psalm is what I’m all about; this psalm reveals what I’m here to do, what I’m doing right now.”

If it’s true that this is the most important quote Jesus ever made, that this reveals the essence of who Jesus is, and secondly, if Jesus is the most important single human figure in the history of the world, then thirdly, anyone who wants to live in this world, understanding what’s going on in it, needs to understand this psalm.

The way to do that is to ask these three questions:

 1. What is the mystery of this psalm?

2. What is the solution to the mystery?

 3. What does it mean practically for us?

Let’s look at the mystery of this psalm, the solution for the mystery of this psalm, and then, practically, what it means for us.

**Tuesday: The Mystery of the Psalm**

Now the first thing is I want you to see is how incredibly mysterious this psalm is, as it reads. It’s an enormously mysterious, difficult writing. This is David’s psalm. This is a psalm of King David (Psalm 22). I want you to notice a couple of things that are just about inexplicable about it. First, there’s the inexplicable juridical nature of David’s treatment. What’s happening to him? Hmm? Class? What’s happening to him? In verses 6–8, we see he is out in public, where people are jeering at him. In verse 17, they’re gloating and they’re scorning him. Secondly, he’s dying of thirst (verse 15) so that the tongue has swollen up and has begun to choke him. He is so emaciated (verse 17) that you can see his bones … every one of them. In verse 16, he has been pierced in his hands and his feet, either by a sword or by a shaft or by a spear. What is happening to him? This is an execution. This is a public execution. The clincher to that interpretation is verse 18, where it says, “They cast lots for my garments.” You see, when a criminal was executed, the executioners got the clothes.

Now the reason this is an incredible mystery is, where in the world was King David ever up being executed? Where did he have a public trial? Where was he executed? We know more about David’s life than any other figure of ancient history/antiquity, and there’s nothing about this there. In fact, how could there be? How could the greatest king of Israel have ever come into this situation? In fact, we have to be careful not to be anachronistic and read what we do today back into those days. If you overthrew a king, you didn’t have a public trial; you didn’t do the Saddam Hussein thing. You didn’t bring him for a public trial and have a jury and a judge and all that sort of thing. You just had a coup; you killed him. Then you sat on the throne yourself. In other words, not only did this never happen to David, but it couldn’t have happened to David.

That’s not all. Not only do we have the inexplicably juridical nature of his treatment, but we have the inexplicable submissiveness of David to this treatment. If you read the book of Psalms, one thing you know is that David never took injustice lying down. Never. He’s always crying out for justice. He’s always crying out that God would smash the perpetrators’ teeth. He’s always saying things that are kind of harsh to our modern ears. None of that is here. Even though this is the most extreme situation we see anywhere in any of the Psalms, the most extreme situation and the most extreme injustice, and there is not a word crying out for God to smash the perpetrators.

So we see the inexplicable juridical nature of his treatment, the inexplicable submissiveness of David to the treatment, and, of course, lastly, the inexplicable absence of God. Because verses 4 and 5 historically say, “If you cry in faith to God, God will hear you.” But God is treating David as if he was faithless. God, in verse 1, is not hearing him. He is treating him as if he’s somebody he’s not. But the most inexplicable of all the parts of this psalm is the ending. See, in verses 20 and 21, David is saying, “Deliver me from death.” “Deliver my life from the sword. Rescue me …” Then in verse 22, he’s talking as if this deliverance is going to happen or it has happened. “I will declare your name … For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he … has listened to his cry for help.” In other words, verse 22 and following, we see that David says, “I will be delivered from death,” or “I have been delivered from death.” But look at the results. In verse 27 he says, “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him.” What? David says, “I was about to be executed, but God delivered me from death, and because of that, all the nations of the earth will get converted.” The poor nations (verse 26) and the rich nations (verse 29). What he’s saying is, “As a result of my deliverance, instead of one little racial ethnic group worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all the nations of the earth will be doing that.” He has the audacity to go further and to say that it’s not just that this deliverance is going to lead to mass conversion of the peoples of the earth to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also that endless generations will remember this deliverance. In verses 30 and 31 it says, “Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord … for he has done it.”

How could David possibly imagine that his deliverance from death (no matter how heroic, no matter how dramatic) could possibly lead to the conversion of all the nations of the earth? Do you see that this psalm, on the face of it, as it is read, is an absolute enigma, is unbelievably mysterious? How in the world the original hearers would have read it, I have no idea.

**Wednesday: The Solution of the Mystery**

But what’s the solution of the mystery? Well, there’s only one solution I know. There’s only one way to account for this psalm. And that’s to believe what the apostle Peter said in Acts 2:31. He said, “Being a prophet, David foresaw and spoke of the Christ.” In other words, what Peter is saying is that David was suffering, and he was meditating and reflecting on his suffering., but as he did so, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he got prophetic insight into a Greater David, who was going to go through a greater suffering, a greater abandonment by God, a greater deliverance that would lead to an everlasting kingdom. In other words, when Jesus cried this out on the cross, he says, “There’s absolutely no possible way to make any sense of Psalm 22 unless you understand it’s about me, and you will only be able to make sense of me if you understand Psalm 22.” So what does this great cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” tell us about what Jesus is all about? It tells us three things. The first thing it tells us is about the infinity of his sufferings. Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” When he screamed it, you realized what a departure that was. Because up until that point, Jesus had been getting all kinds of things happening to him, and he hadn’t said a word. He had been flogged. He had been beaten. He had been mocked, of course. He’d had thorns driven into his skull. He actually had nails driven through his hands. And all during that time, he was quiet. He was silent. He had that kind of poise. He took it. In fact, the text says he was “like a lamb that is silent before his shearers.” So he never said a thing. All that suffering, all that pain, and he never said a thing. He could take it.

Then suddenly, he screams, and that means something new is happening. Something … some kind of agony, some kind of pain beyond the physical, beyond the nails, beyond the thorns, beyond all that. Because he doesn’t cry, “My hands, my hands,” does he? He doesn’t cry, “My feet, my feet,” “My skull, my skull.” He cries, “My God, my God …” He is experiencing something infinitely beyond, worse than the physical suffering. It is separation from God. Do you understand that? Do we understand that? The Bible says, and we know, that we’re made for relationships. And as bad as it is to lose all your money, and as bad as it is to lose health, that’s nothing like losing love. It’s nothing like losing the love of a lifetime. Counselors will tell you, psychologists will tell you, that there is nothing more devastating than to lose a lifetime love. But look at Jesus. His relationship with the Father is not just a 30- or 40-year love relationship; they’ve loved one another from all eternity. This isn’t two parties whose bodies have been pressed together to express love, but they’ve been wrapped up in each other’s souls literally from all eternity. Here’s the Son who lived utterly for the Father, who lived wholly for the Father, and he’s lost him. And just as physical pain is infinitely less than the pain of a loss of love, so the pain of a loss of a human relationship is infinitely less than this. We know the agony of the loss of human love. What must this have been like? See, the Bible says, also, that we’re made for the presence of God. We need the presence of God, spiritually, the way a flower needs the sunlight or it fades. And, you know, if the sun were suddenly to go off, every living organism on this earth would immediately freeze, would immediately be destroyed. When Jesus Christ lost the Father’s presence, at that instant, Jesus was engulfed in absolute freezing, eternal darkness. His soul unraveled infinitely. He experienced absolute infinite spiritual disruption. He says, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

And the first thing we learn from this cry is the infinity of his suffering. The second thing we learn from this cry is the infinity of his faithfulness. See, on the surface, when he says, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” it seems like he’s losing his grip, doesn’t it? But it doesn’t; it means exactly the opposite. Do you know what it means to say, “My God”? Do you know what it meant to Jesus? It’s the language of covenant faithfulness. When God got the people of Israel together at Sinai, he looked down from Mt. Sinai and he said, “I’m going to enter into an intimate personal relationship with you, an intimate covenant with you. You will be my people and I will be your God.” So when Jesus is calling him, “My God,” it’s the language of covenant loyalty; it’s the language of faithfulness; it’s the language of intimacy. I mean, if you overhear someone saying, “My Sally,” or “My Johnny,” you may not know who they are at all, but you know they must be their children, it must be their spouse, or something like that, because you don’t say, “My …” without it being the language of intimacy. Now do you know what this means? In the midst of his infinite suffering, Jesus is saying, “My God.” Captain Ahab, just before he died, said to Moby Dick, “From hell’s heart I stab at thee.” Well, get this. Here is Jesus Christ, somebody who was literally in hell’s heart. He was literally in hell’s heart. But do you know what he says from hell’s heart? He says from hell’s heart, “I still love you.” In hell’s heart, “I’m still faithful to you. You are still my God. I am still faithful to my covenant God.” He is still loving God in the midst of this infinite suffering. You know, the direction to the first Adam was, “Obey God and you will live.” But the direction of the second Adam (Jesus Christ) is, “Obey God and he’ll crush you to powder,” and he still did it … for us. So we see the infinity of his suffering in “… why hast thou forsaken me?” but we see the infinity of his faithfulness in the, “My God, my God …?” When you put it together, you see, with the infinity of his sufferings and the infinity of his faithfulness, we have an infinite redemption. Because here is someone living the faithful life we should have lived, and at the very same moment, dying the death that faithless people should die … for us, in our place. The most dramatic of all dramatic themes is the great substitution of the Rescuer. The great substitution of the Rescuer. What does a rescuer do? A rescuer is in safety. Someone is in danger. Rescuers give up their safety and go into danger so those in danger can have safety. And very often, the ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate substitution, is the rescuers give up their lives so that those who are about to die get theirs back. Now this is the way it is in all the most moving stories, whether they’re true or not. There are the true stories.… I mean, I’ll never forget the, that man who kept diving back and back in to the icy Potomac River, and he brought back up, he saved one passenger after another passenger from that crashed airliner, until finally he went down and didn’t come up again. You know, when they finally lifted his lifeless body out of the water with a crane, what he looked like? He was on the cross. What did he do? He gave up his safety and went into danger. He gave up his life and went into death so those in danger could have safety, so those about to die could have life.

And of course it’s true of all the stories, even the most ancient stories. Even the stories that aren’t true move us because of this. Tolkien once said this is the essence of the most moving stories: “… when things are in danger, someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.” When things are in danger, some people lose them (give them up) so others can keep them. Well, here’s the ultimate example of that, the ultimate substitute. You know that great George Herbert poem, “The Sacrifice,” where Jesus is speaking from the cross, he’s hanging on the tree, and there’s one stanza where he’s speaking to the people and he’s thinking about Adam and Eve, and he says: O all ye who pass by, behold and see; Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the tree; The tree of life to all, but only me: Was ever grief like mine? The cross is the tree of life for everyone because it was a tree of death for him. That’s the ultimate substitute and that’s what you have. The cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Infinite faithfulness and infinite suffering so that we would have an infinite redemption. When we take hold of that, no matter who you are or what you’ve done, God takes you into his family. Now what does this mean? What does this mean?

**Thursday: What Does It Mean Practically For Us? Part 1.**

What does this cry, what does Psalm 22, what does the cross mean for us, practically? Well gosh, this is a sermon on the cross, so obviously we could go on for years and years. But let’s not. Let’s go on just for a few more minutes, and let me just suggest three radical, profound, practical implications of what Jesus Christ said on the cross for us. Three ways … I want to look at how Jesus’ cry affects your personal transformation, your experience of suffering, and the feeling sometimes that God abandons us. Your personal transformation, the experience of suffering, and the feeling that God sometimes abandons us. First, this is the key to real change. I know it is for me. Because the cry on the cross forces me to see that the God of the Bible, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, is absolutely holy and absolutely loving at the same time. I can’t (though I’ll try) say it more emphatically, that your temperament, your psychology, your religious background, your church background … wherever you came from, and your culture, every culture, every temperament, every church tends to basically see God as more holy than loving or more loving than holy, but he is both. And only because he is both, only when he is both, only when you grasp it, only when it really comes together in your life and really smacks you in the face, will it really change you. You see, “… why hast thou forsaken me?” means he was so holy that Jesus had to die. But, “My God, my God …?” means that Jesus was so loving that he was willing to die.

 In other words, this cry shows me the absolute holiness and absolute love of God at the same time, and that’s the key to your transformation. How so? Well, follow and think with me for a minute. If you are of a conservative temperament or of a conservative ilk, you tend to think of God as basically holy and righteous. You think that if a person is saved, they are saved because they live a holy, moral, and righteous life. But then when you think of your relationship with God, it doesn’t move you, it doesn’t fill you with joy and tears, it doesn’t melt your heart, it doesn’t galvanize you, it doesn’t exhilarate you. You say, “Well, sure, yeah, of course, you know. I believe in God. I’m trying to live a good life.” On the other hand, what if you’re of a more liberal temperament? What if you’re of a more liberal ilk, and you tend to think of God as mainly loving? You say, “I believe in a God who just loves everyone and accepts everyone, no matter how they live.” You would say, therefore, that if a person is saved, they’re saved because God just loves them and forgives everyone no matter who they are. But if that’s the case, and you think of your relationship with God, it doesn’t move you, it doesn’t fill you with tears, it doesn’t shock you, it doesn’t galvanize you, it doesn’t exhilarate you. You say, “Well, sure, sure. I believe in God and I have a relationship with God. He loves me. He loves everybody.” It doesn’t move you; it doesn’t change you.

I remember after worship service once, years ago, a woman came up to me afterwards and told me how narrow she thought my whole sermon was. (I’m not encouraging anybody, by the way. You know, if you think my sermon is very narrow, tell somebody next to you. Okay? And see what they say.). I said, “Why?” She said, “Well, because this whole idea that you have to believe Jesus died. I believe in a God of pure love who loves everybody no matter what. Just loves everyone.” I guess I was in a bad mood that day, because I said to her, “Let me ask you a question. What did it cost your god to love you?” She said, “I guess nothing.” And here you have it. A loving god who is not holy isn’t as loving as the biblical God. A holy god who isn’t loving isn’t actually as holy as the biblical God. You know why? You see, the moralistic god of some people who say, “You have to be good,” the biblical God, just trying your best isn’t enough. The relativistic god of people who say, “Oh, God just loves everyone.” But that’s not as loving as the God who because he was holy and loving gave us grace. You see, because he’s loving, there’s free, free, free, free grace for us. But because he’s holy, it was costly grace, infinitely costly grace. When I just hear, “Oh, God is holy and demanding,” that just … I might, out of fear, listen to him, but it doesn’t change me in my heart. And if I hear, “Oh, God is just very, very loving and he accepts everybody,” well, that’s nice and that inspires me, but that doesn’t change me in my heart. But when I know that I am the recipient of this kind of costly grace, when I know Jesus Christ went to hell’s heart for me and was loving and obedient for me … there. That’s what changes me. That’s tears. That’s amazement. That’s exhilaration. That’s galvanizing. You know why it changes? Because at the very same time, on the one hand, it humbles me out of my pride and self-centeredness and it affirms me out of my inferiority and self-pity at the same time. It makes me hate my sins because it led to his death. But it forbids me to hate myself because he did it for me, to make me free.

**Friday: What Does It Mean Practically For Us? Part 2.**

I mean, there is nothing that changes you like an understanding of a God who is absolutely holy and absolutely loving at once. It will just pull you out of every psychological category there is. There are no inferiority complexes. There are no superiority complexes. You’re off the map. You’re off the scale. Understanding the cry of Jesus on the cross is the key to personal transformation. Secondly, understanding the cry of Jesus Christ on the cross gives us two terrific resources for suffering. Now I know this year we’ve talked a lot about suffering in the sermons, but this cry on the cross gives us two amazing resources for suffering. If you’re in trouble right now, if you’re in pain right now, take hold of these.

The first is the cry of Jesus on the cross (Psalm 22) gives us the greatest possible companion for our suffering. Do you know the thing you mainly need in suffering is not answers? You can make it without answers. Now what do I mean by that? Well, I mean, when you suffer, you have questions. You say, “Why? Why is this happening to me? Why does this have to happen? Why at this time?” I mean, when you suffer, you have lots of questions. But, you know, you can make it without questions. But you can’t make it out, you can’t make it, without companionship. You can’t make it if you have to suffer alone. You can’t make it without friendship. You can’t make it without companionship. And Christianity is the only religion on the face of the earth that says God is your companion in suffering, that God has suffered, that God does suffer. David Watson, who was a Christian leader some years ago, was dying of cancer when he wrote this. He says, “Someone once said to me, ‘There cannot be a God of love, because if there was and he looked upon the world, his heart would break.’ But the gospel points to the cross and says, “It did break.” Someone once said to me, ‘It’s God who made the world, it’s he who should bear the load.’ The gospel points to the cross and says, “He did bear the load.” God weeps with those who weep. He feels our pain and enters into our sorrows with his compassionate love.” A man dying of cancer. So the first thing you get is the greatest possible companion in suffering.

But the second thing you get is the greatest possible future. This cry gives us the greatest possible future for our suffering. The worst thing about being in darkness is to think that there’s no light at the end of the tunnel. But when Jesus Christ cried out in the midst of his darkness, there was deliverance. The suffering of Jesus Christ means that our suffering has a future. What do I mean by that? Well, Michael Green wrote this. He says: “Jesus’ cry on the cross means, for Christians, there is a future for suffering. Suffering, ultimately, is not blind, wanton, and senseless. It has a purpose. Look what Jesus’ suffering produced. Look what benefits flowed from the awesome suffering gladly endured. It is the same with Jesus’ followers, mystery though it is. Much flows from it when it is gladly endured. Character is formed by it. Art and creativity is stimulated by it. Compassion and care is evoked by it. Royalty comes from it. Jesus was regal on the cross in his suffering. And in the end, the greatest mystery of all, 2 Corinthians 4:17 reads, ‘For this light momentary affliction [which is only for a moment] is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison …’ ” This is a simple fact, that there’s a future to your suffering. If you’re suffering, you don’t just stay in suffering. If you embrace Jesus Christ, his substitutionary dynamic and paradigm comes into your own life. One of the things I’ve noticed, for example, over the years (my wife and I were talking about this recently) is when you’re in the midst of pain, you always say, “Oh, my gosh!” I mean, you never want it back, and you don’t understand it, and it seems like it’s too much to bear. But whatever you lose shows up again somewhere else in a different way, and it’s redemptive. I’m sorry for being self-referential, but everything I’ve ever suffered personally, everything I’ve ever lost, has shown up again in my preaching and pastoring. It has made me a vastly better preacher and pastor than I ever would’ve been if I’d had all the easy places where I’d had hard places. There’s something about Jesus. You put him in the center of your life, and then as his suffering has a future, its redemption, your suffering will have a future, its redemption. Things will flow from it. I can personally vouch for it. Lastly, this cry also gives us some comfort and some resources when you feel God has abandoned you. See, here’s Jesus saying, “You have forsaken me.” Have you never felt that way? Of course you have!

We’re constantly feeling like God has forsaken us, God has abandoned us. You know, Martin Luther said this about Psalm 22. He said, “Psalm 22 has helped me out of difficulties from which no king or ruler could have ever freed me.” I’m not totally sure what he meant by that, but I think I know, because I know Martin Luther. Martin Luther was a melancholic. He was a person who, because of his temperament, maybe because of his physiology, he had trouble holding on to radiant feelings. He had trouble holding on to positive emotions. He had trouble feeling God’s presence, and there are a lot of us who are like that. We have trouble feeling God’s presence. And very often, we’re always feeling he abandons us because of timing, you know? Abraham got Isaac, but not in his timing, in God’s timing. And God’s timing is almost never our timing. That’s another reason we feel abandoned. So we’re always feeling forsaken; we’re always feeling abandoned. But look, do you know what this tells us? Jesus Christ was truly deserted by God so that you are only ever apparently deserted by God. He got the abandonment we deserve; therefore, God will never truly abandon you at all. You feel abandoned because your feelings aren’t reliable. Because of your physiology, because of your sense of timing, you may feel abandoned but you’re not abandoned because Jesus was abandoned and got the abandonment you should have gotten. Jesus was truly deserted so you are only ever apparently so. And look. Jesus Christ, truly deserted, was loving you. So when you are only apparently feeling deserted by God, why can’t you just keep loving him? Why can’t you just hold on, obey, read your Bible, pray, come to church, help somebody else, and do the next thing? And he’ll be back, in your feelings, because he’s never left you, objectively. Jesus Christ was deserted really so that you would only be deserted apparently. His love in time past forbids me to think, He’ll leave me at last in trouble to sink; By prayer, let me wrestle, then he will perform, With Christ in the vessel, I smile at the storm. Let us pray: Thank you, Father, for showing us through this psalm who Jesus is. We are that posterity. We are those generations, who now, centuries later, praise you for what you’ve done when you delivered Jesus Christ from death through the resurrection. It is now truly the case that there are hundreds of millions of people in all nations of the earth who now praise your name and worship you. Nothing else could have done it. What else could have done it? But you did it through him, and we are part of those generations and we are part of those different people groups. There are a couple dozen families of nations that are actually represented in this very room, and we are praising you because you have done it. You delivered Jesus, and by it, you delivered us. We thank you, Father, for what Jesus did for us on the cross, and we ask that you would help us to apply it to our lives in the ways we’ve discussed today. We pray it in Jesus’ name, amen. TRUE WISDOM Proverbs: True Wisdom for Living—September 12, 2004 Proverbs 8:10–16, 22–31 10 Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold,

Timothy J. Keller, [*The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*](https://ref.ly/res/LLS%3ATMKLLRSRMNRCHVJ/2023-10-12T00%3A22%3A22Z/32558282?len=30635) (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).