The Agony of the Cross and the Faithfulness of God

Psalm 22:1–31

November 1, 2026 — New Baptist Church
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Introduction

We are currently working through the book of Psalms, and the psalms I have chosen for this study are ones that have been deeply meaningful to me personally. Today we are looking at Psalm 22 — possibly the most important psalm in this entire series for me — because it brings me to the cross.

The psalm is attributed to David. The superscription reads: *"To the choirmaster: according to The Doe of the Dawn. A Psalm of David."* David lived a thousand years before Jesus. A thousand years before the Romans came along and devised crucifixion as a way to kill someone in the most shameful, public, and brutal manner imaginable. A thousand years before crucifixion was even a thing, we have in Psalm 22 the death of Jesus upon the cross — not told from a third-person perspective, as if someone were looking on from a distance, but told from the perspective of Jesus himself, dying upon the cross.

When I read Psalm 22, I feel a kinship with that Roman centurion who stood at the foot of the cross, witnessed how Jesus died, and exclaimed, *"Truly this man was the Son of God!"* (Mark 15:39). And that is my prayer for you today — that Psalm 22 will cause your heart to glorify and praise the Lord.

A Timeline of the Crucifixion

Before we read Psalm 22, this thousand-year-old prophecy that became history at the cross, I want to lay out a simple framework of what happened when Jesus was crucified. The Gospels give us a great deal of detail, and even timestamps.

From the third hour to the sixth — nine o'clock in the morning to noon — Jesus was nailed to the cross. Iron nails were driven through his hands and feet. During those first three hours, he was mocked relentlessly: the religious leaders sneered, *"Let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!"* The crowds passing by jeered. The soldiers taunted him, *"If*

you are the King of the Jews, save yourself," and posted a sign above his head reading *"King of the Jews."* They cast lots for his clothing. Even one of the thieves crucified alongside him joined in the mockery. Yet it was during this same stretch that Jesus forgave his tormentors — *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"* — promised the repentant thief that he would be with him in paradise that very day, and entrusted the care of his mother to the disciple John.

From noon to three o'clock in the afternoon, a deep darkness fell upon the land. Jesus had now been on the cross for three hours, and the suffering was taking its full toll. The mechanics of crucifixion are merciless: to breathe, a victim must push up against the nails in his feet, and over time the arms and shoulders begin to dislocate under the body's own weight.

At three o'clock — the ninth hour, the very hour of the Passover sacrifice — death comes. Jesus has been on the cross for six hours, and the land has been dark for three. He cries out in a loud voice, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* He says, *"I thirst."* He declares, *"It is finished."* And finally, *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."* Jesus dies. The earth shakes. The veil of the temple is torn in two. A blood moon rises on the horizon. And a Roman centurion, standing there watching how he died, says, *"Truly this man was the Son of God."*

Jesus then remains on the cross, dead, for another three hours. As sunset approaches, soldiers are sent to break the legs of those crucified — a mercy killing to hasten death — but finding Jesus already dead, a soldier pierces his side instead, and out flow blood and water. Between six and seven o'clock in the evening, he is taken down from the cross. Total crucifixion time: nine to ten hours.

With that outline in mind, let us turn to Psalm 22. In this psalm, two things are happening at the exact same time. At the very moment the agony of the cross is taking place, the faithfulness of God is being revealed. And so the psalm will alternate between those two realities — the agony and the faithfulness — again and again. It begins with the first agony: divine forsaken-ness.

The First Agony: Divine Forsakenness

> *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest. (Psalm 22:1–2)*

Jesus said these exact words from the cross. Matthew describes the moment this way: *"He cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have*

you forsaken me?'" (Matthew 27:46). Notice that Matthew says Jesus *cried out*. When he speaks these words, it is a cry of desolation. He is expressing the horror of what is happening to him. The "why" in *"why have you forsaken me"* is not a question of theological curiosity — it is an expression of anguish and agony.

I believe Jesus cried out these words for two reasons. First, he was so saturated with the Word of God that in a moment of extremity, Scripture is simply what came to him. It is the language he speaks. But second, he cried out Psalm 22:1 because it was true. Isaiah 53:5 tells us that *"he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities."* He bore our sin, and with it, our judgment. And the full penalty of sin — judged and under the wrath of God — is ultimately separation from God and death. Which is precisely what Jesus experienced upon the cross. What was due to me — death and separation from God — he suffered in my place.

God's Faithfulness: Holy and Faithful to Save

Yet at the very same moment the sun went dark and the Son of God was forsaken, the holiness and faithfulness of God were being revealed. This is where Psalm 22 turns. Notice the word *yet*.

> *Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame. (Psalm 22:3–5)*

The holiness of God speaks to his otherness, his perfection, his purity. And at the cross, God's holy and perfect justice is revealed. You may recall that when Moses stood at Sinai and asked God to show him his glory, what God revealed was his perfect justice: *"I will not leave the guilty unpunished"* (Exodus 34:7) — and yet at the very same time, his perfect faithfulness in love, *"forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin"* (Exodus 34:7). How can God be simultaneously perfect in justice and perfect in love? The answer is the cross. Both are happening at the same time, in the same event, at the same moment.

The Second Agony: Rejection and Shame

> *But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads: "He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!" (Psalm 22:6–8)*

It is remarkable to me that a thousand years before the cross, David wrote the very words that the religious leaders would shout at Jesus on the day of his crucifixion. Listen to Matthew 27:39–43:

> *And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'"*

The very religious leaders who rejected Christ were, in the very words they chose to speak, fulfilling prophecy about him. And here is the depth of the agony. The people that the eternal Word of God had created, loved, and come to save looked upon him and declared him unwanted, unworthy, and undeserving of life itself. They despised him, stripped him of his dignity, and sought to erase him from their presence.

God's Faithfulness: Sovereign and Faithful in His Care

Yet at the exact same moment, the Lord is sovereign and faithful in his care.

> *Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God. (Psalm 22:9–10)*

This passage tells us two things about God: his sovereignty and his care. You are the one who took me from the womb. You are the one who has sustained me from the beginning. Which means, in the context of the cross, the crucifixion of Jesus was not an accident. It was not God losing control, or becoming weak, or being outmaneuvered. The death of Jesus upon the cross was absolutely part of God's perfect sovereign plan — because he is faithful to care. He cares about you.

The cross is not only an image of ugliness and shame and divine judgment upon sin. It is also an image of God's love, his care, and his faithfulness toward you.

The Third Agony: Physical Torment and Death

> *Be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help. Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion. (Psalm 22:11–13)*

This is the language of pack animals — vicious, circling, attacking. It describes the crowds closing in on Jesus. And then the psalm turns to the body itself.

> *I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet. (Psalm 22:14–16)*

A thousand years before crucifixion was a thing, David describes the cross from a first-person perspective. When a person is crucified, iron nails are driven into the hands and feet, and hanging from those nails, the joints of the body are pulled apart. Those crucified would have been beaten, bleeding, suffering various forms of internal injury. And after six hours on the cross, the thirst alone would be unbearable — which is exactly why Jesus, as he approached death, cried out, *"I thirst"* (John 19:28).

But the psalm adds two further details that are almost too precise to absorb.

> *I can count all my bones — they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots. (Psalm 22:17–18)*

All four Gospels record the soldiers casting lots for Jesus' garments. And all four Gospels note that Jesus' bones were not broken when the soldiers came to deal the death blow — they found him already dead. His bones were dislocated, pulled out of joint by the weight of his own body hanging on the cross, but not one of them was broken. Even in death, the faithfulness of God is at work, down to the smallest detail.

God's Faithfulness: Glorious and Faithful to Turn Lament into Praise

> *But you, O LORD, do not be far off! O you my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog! Save me from the mouth of the lion! (Psalm 22:19–21a)*

And then something happens. Right there in verse 21, there is a gap — a silence — and then the voice changes entirely.

> *You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen! (Psalm 22:21b)*

We are given no account of what happens in that gap. The plea *"Save me from the mouth of the lion"* is answered in the very next breath by *"You have rescued me,"* with nothing in between to explain how. I think Psalm 23 fits into that gap. It is the next psalm, after all — and there we read of deliverance from the valley of the shadow of death, which I take as a prophetic foreshadowing of the resurrection. In Psalm 22, all we are given is this: the one who was pierced in his hands and feet and laid down in the dust of death is now saved. We on this side of the cross can name that salvation. It is the resurrection on the third day.

And because he rose again, all the fear and lament of the disciples turned to joy. We see it in John 20. The disciples are locked in the upper room, afraid and grieving. Then Jesus appears among them, and the text simply says: *"Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord"* (John 20:20). Lament turns to joy, and joy turns to praise, and praise ascends to the Father in an ever-expanding wave.

This is exactly how Psalm 22 ends. Beginning from that upper room, from those first disciples, the praise rolls outward.

> *I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you. You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him, and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him. (Psalm 22:22–24)*

From the disciples it spreads to the Jewish congregation, then to the great assembly, then to the poor and the afflicted, then outward to all the nations.

> *All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations. (Psalm 22:27–28)*

Psalm 22 is describing the Gospel going forth into all the world — from the disciples, to Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And the praise does not stop there. It reaches the prosperous and the powerful, it reaches even those who have gone down to the dust of death, and it reaches into the future, to generations not yet born.

> *Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation. (Psalm 22:30)*

Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the praise expands from that upper room into the whole world, into the grave, and into every generation yet to come.

"He Has Done It"

We come now to the final words of Psalm 22:

> *They shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it. (Psalm 22:31)*

In Hebrew, that final phrase — *"he has done it"* — is expressed in a single word: *asah* (עָשָׂה). He has acted. He has accomplished it. It is done.

And those are the final words of Jesus from the cross. *τετέλεσται* (*tetelestai*) — *"It is finished!"* (John 19:30). *"When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, 'It is finished,' and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."*

When Jesus said *"It is finished,"* he was not merely declaring that his agony was over and that death had come. He was declaring that the great work of redemption — promised from the very beginning, anticipated in every sacrifice, foreshadowed in every psalm — had been accomplished. The penalty of sin has been borne. The demands of divine justice have been fully satisfied. The righteousness that we could never achieve has been secured for us in Christ. God's perfect holiness has not been compromised, and his steadfast love has not failed. At the cross, justice and mercy meet. The faithfulness of God to save has been revealed in all its glory.

And *it is finished* means it is done. Nothing remains to be added to what Christ has accomplished. Nothing.

Conclusion

My purpose this morning has been to lead you to do what the psalm itself leads us to do: to praise and glorify the Lord. In the cross of Christ, we see the faithfulness of God from every angle. He is holy and faithful to save. He is sovereign and faithful in his care. And he alone is worthy of all praise — faithful to turn every lament into praise.

So this morning, what is your lament? What is your hurt? Where do you feel rejected, abandoned, forgotten? I invite you to look to the cross. There you will find the deepest

suffering imaginable, but also the perfect faithfulness of God. And because Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, we know that suffering does not have the final word. Death does not have the final word. Our laments do not have the final word.

The final word belongs to Jesus: *"It is finished."*

Whatever your circumstances, trust in his faithfulness to save, his faithfulness to care, and his faithfulness to turn your laments into praise.