

An X-Ray of the Cross

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee



Published and distributed by
Thru the Bible Radio Network
P.O. Box 7100
Pasadena, California 91109-7100
(800) 65-BIBLE
www.ttb.org

Scripture references are from the *King James Version Bible*.
(This message is also included in the hardback book, *Feasting on the Word*,
Copyright 1992 by J. Vernon McGee.)

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent. But thou art holy, O thou who inhabitest the praises of Israel. Our fathers trusted in thee; they trusted, and thou didst deliver them. They cried unto thee, and were delivered; they trusted in thee, and were not confounded. But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised by the people. (Psalm 22:1-6)

There are several Scriptures with which I never feel adequate to deal. This is one of them. When we come to Psalm 22 I feel that we are standing on holy ground and we should take off our spiritual shoes. This psalm is called the Psalm of the Cross. It is so named because it describes more accurately and minutely the crucifixion of Christ than does any other portion of the Word of God. It corresponds, of course, to the twenty-second chapter of Genesis and the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah.

We have many messianic psalms which are pictures of Christ. The first psalm, for instance, is a portrait of Christ in His character – who He is, His life, His practice. But in Psalm 22 we have an x-ray which penetrates into His thoughts and into His inner life. In this psalm we see the anguish of His passion. His soul is laid bare. In the Gospels is recorded the historical fact of His death and some of the events which attended His crucifixion, but only in Psalm 22 are His thoughts revealed. It has been the belief of many scholars that the Lord Jesus, while on the cross, actually quoted the entire twenty-second psalm. I concur in this, because the seven last sayings that are given in the Gospels either appear in this psalm or the psychological background for them is here.

It is the custom in many churches to conduct a Good Friday service in which seven ministers bring messages from the seven last sayings of Christ from the cross. In the course of fifteen years, I have heard over one hundred men deal with these seven words. It is always a spiritual feast to hear how each man develops the subject, and always there are many new and profitable thoughts presented. However, we shall attempt to encompass all seven sayings in one message. And instead of standing beneath the cross and listening to Him, we are going to hang on the cross with Him. We shall view the crucifixion of Christ from a new position – from the cross itself. And we can look with Him on those beneath His cross, as He was hanging there, and see what went on in His heart and in His mind. We shall see what occurred in His soul as He became the sacrifice for the sins of the world. As He was suspended there between heaven and earth, He became the ladder let down from heaven to this earth so that men might have a way to God.

We were there, if you please, on that cross as He was made sin for us – He who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God through Him. We were as truly on that cross when He died as we today are *in* Christ by faith. Peter put it like this:

Who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness; by whose stripes ye were healed. (1 Peter 2:24)

Healed from sin!

My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me? (Matthew 27:46)

Psalm 22 opens with the plaintive and desperate cry of this poor, lone man, forsaken of God. There has been an attempt made to play down the stark reality and the bitter truth that He was forsaken of God. I hold an article written by a local minister who takes the position that Jesus was not forsaken. He attempts to translate “*Eli, Eli lama sabachthani*” to mean “My God, my God, for this was I kept.” His authority is the Peshitta, or the Syriac version. However, the Peshitta is not a good manuscript. It never has been used by any reputable translator, for it is not a reliable translation. Evidently it was made by some who had gone into a heresy at the very beginning. The value of it is that it throws light, in many places, on the customs in Palestine during that period. I have used it in that connection on several occasions, but never would I accept the translation. Actually, the Hebrew is very clear, and the Greek is very clear, and the Aramaic is very clear – in each language the cry means that Jesus was forsaken of God.

Now this is something I want to emphasize from the very beginning: We have here a record of His *human suffering*. We see Him hanging there as a man, “the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.”

We get more light on this by turning to the Epistle to the Hebrews:

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels [a little lower than the angels? Yes, made a man. Why?] for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man. (Hebrews 2:9)

That is what we are looking at – the one who left heaven’s glory and became a man. He became a man to reveal God, yes, that is true, but most of all to redeem man.

Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil. (Hebrews 2:14)

He could save no one by His life. It was His sacrificial death that saves.

And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham....For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour [help] them that are tempted. (Hebrews 2:15, 16, 18)

We see the man Christ Jesus on the cross as the perfect man. He had learned to rest upon God. He had learned to trust Him in all that He did. He said, “I do always the things that please Him.” But yonder in that desperate and despairing hour He is abandoned of God. There is no place to turn either on the human plane or on the divine. He has no place to go. The man Christ Jesus is forsaken. No other ever has had to experience that. No one. He alone.

Why did God forsake Him? Turn back to Psalm 22:

But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel. (Psalm 22:3)

Why was He forsaken of God? Because on the cross in those last three hours, in the impenetrable darkness, He was made sin.

*But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed;
Nor how dark was the night that
the Lord passed through
Ere He found His sheep that was lost.*

He was forsaken for a brief moment. The paradox is that at that very moment God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. And the Lord Jesus Himself said,

Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me. (John 16:32)

The Father was with Him when He was in prison. The Father was with Him when He was being beaten. The Father was with Him when they nailed Him to the cross. But in those last three hours He made His soul an offering for sin, and it pleased the Father to bruise Him.

Forsaken.

My friend, you do not know what that is, and I do not know what it is to be forsaken of God. The vilest man on this earth today is not forsaken of God. Anyone can turn to Him. But when Christ took my sin upon Himself, He was forsaken of God.

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

It is not the *why* of impatience. It is not the *why* of despair. It is not the *why* of doubt. It is the human cry of intense suffering, aggravated by the anguish of His innocent and holy life. That awful and agonizing cry of the loneliness of His passion! He was alone. He was alone with the sins of the world upon Him.

...Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? (Psalm 22:1)

Roaring? Yes. At His trial He was silent, "As a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7). When they beat Him He said nothing, when they nailed Him to the cross, He did not whimper. But when God forsook Him, He roared like a lion. It was a roar of pain. Have you ever been in the woods when dogs attacked an animal? Have you heard the shriek of that animal? There is nothing quite like it. And that is what the writer is attempting to convey to us here. I think that shriek from the cross rent the rocks, for it had been His voice that had created them. Now the Creator was suffering! On that cross He cried like a wounded animal, not sounding as a human cry but like a wild, roaring lion. It was the plaintive shriek and the wail of unutterable woe as our sins were pressed down upon Him.

Now notice verse 6 of Psalm 22:

But I am a worm....

What does He mean when He says, "I am a worm"? He has roared like a lion, but now He says, "I am a worm." It is because He has reached the very lowest place.

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

(Isaiah 53:3)

“I am a worm.” The interesting thing is that the word used here for worm means the coccus worm, which was used by the Hebrews in dyeing all the curtains of the tabernacle scarlet red. When He said, “I am a worm,” He meant more than that He had reached the lowest level. It was He who had said, “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” Only His blood, my friend, can rub out that dark, deep spot in your life.

Lady Macbeth, sleepwalking that night, went up and down rubbing her hands, having committed murder after murder. She said, “All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.” And she was right, they could not. She seemed to be continually washing her hands as she rubbed them together, and she cried, “Out damned spot! Out, I say!”

My friend, there is only one thing that will take the spot of sin out of your life, and that is the blood of Christ. The blood of the Lord Jesus, God’s Son, cleanses from all sin. Only His blood.

Father, Forgive Them (Luke 23:34)

Will you look at that victim on the cross? His suffering is intensified by that brutal mob of hardened spectators beneath Him. Look through His eyes and see What He sees.

All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, He trusted on the LORD that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him. (Psalm 22:7, 8)

Some criminals have been so detested that they have been taken from jail and lynched by a mob. But while the criminal was being executed, the mob would disperse. Tempers were cooled and emotions were assuaged. But not this crowd! I think the lowest thing that ever has been said of religion was said of these Pharisees when the Lord Jesus Christ was dying: “And sitting down they watched him there.” You have to be low to do that. In fact, you cannot get lower than that! The venom and vileness of the human heart was being poured out like an open sewer as they remained there and ridiculed Him in His death. After a snake has put its deadly fangs into its victim and emitted its poison, it will slither away in the grass. But not this crowd, and not the human heart in rebellion against God.

Here is where Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” If He had not said that, this crowd would have committed the unpardonable sin. But they did not – He asked forgiveness for their sin. We know that the centurion in charge of the execution was saved, and a whole company of Pharisees, including Saul of Tarsus who probably was in this crowd, were saved.

Woman, Behold Thy Son! (John 19:26)

Now as He looks over the crowd He sees not only eyes of hate and antagonism, but He sees eyes of love. He sees His mother with John down there. “There stood by the cross of Jesus

his mother,” according to John’s record. As Jesus looks at her, do you want to know what went on in His heart? He went back to Bethlehem at the time He was born. And He says to the Father,

But thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother’s breasts. I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my mother’s belly. (Psalm 22:9, 10)

Now to His mother He says, “Woman, behold thy son!” Yonder at the wedding at Cana in Galilee, she had asked Him to do something to show that He was the Messiah, that she was right when she said He was virgin born. She wanted Him to reveal Himself at this wedding. His answer to her at that time was, “Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come.” But there hanging on the cross, “Woman, behold thy son!” His hour has come. The reason for His coming into the world is now being accomplished. This is the most important hour in the history of the world!

Then His attention moves back to those who are doing the crucifying.

Many bulls have compassed me: strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round. (Psalm 22:12)

Describing these soldiers that were crucifying Him, He says they are like the bulls of Bashan, but He does not stop with that, for He is being devoured by wild animals – that is what His tormentors had become:

They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion. (Psalm 22:13)

He is talking about Rome now – Rome crucified Him. He compares them to a roaring lion, for the lion was the picture of Rome.

Now notice His condition:

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. (Psalm 22:14)

This accurate description of crucifixion is remarkable when you consider that crucifixion was unknown when this psalm was written. The Roman Empire was not even in existence, and it was Rome that instituted execution by crucifixion. Yet here is a picture of a man dying by crucifixion!

“I am poured out like water” – the excessive perspiration of a dying man out in that sun.

“All my bones are out of joint” – the horrible thing about crucifixion was that when a man began to lose blood, his strength ebbed from him, and all his bones slipped out of joint. That is an awful thing. It was terrible, terrible suffering.

Then He says something that is indeed strange, “My heart is like wax.” He died of a broken heart. Many doctors have said that a ruptured heart would have produced what John meticulously recorded, “I saw that Roman soldier put the spear in His side, and there came out blood and water” – not just blood, but blood and water. John took note of that and recorded it. May I say to you, Jesus died of a broken heart.

I Thirst (John 19:28)

As He is hanging there ready to expire, with excessive perspiration pouring from Him, He suffers the agony of thirst.

My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death. (Psalm 22:15)

Down beneath the cross they hear Him say, “I thirst.”

For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have enclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. (Psalm 22:16)

“Dog” was the name for Gentiles. The piercing of His hands and feet is an accurate description of crucifixion.

I may tell [count] all my bones: they look and stare upon me. They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture. (Psalm 22:17, 18)

He was crucified naked. It is difficult for us, in this age of nudity and pornography, to comprehend the great humiliation He suffered by hanging nude on the cross. They had taken His garments and gambled for ownership. My friend, He went through it all, crucified naked, that you might be clothed with the righteousness of Christ and stand before God throughout the endless ages of eternity.

Father, Into Thy Hands I Commend My Spirit (Luke 23:46)

But be not thou far from me, O LORD: O my strength, haste thee to help me. Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog. (Psalm 22:19, 20)

The word “darling” is better translated “my only one” – “This is my beloved son.” “Deliver my soul from the sword; my only one from the power of the dog.” Jesus is saying, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit:”

Save me from the lion’s mouth: for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns. (Psalm 22:21)

Again He is saying, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

One of the most remarkable statements is this, “Thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns.” To express intensity in the Hebrew, the plural is used – horns of the unicorns; but the thought is *one horn*.

Now for many years it was thought that the unicorn was a mythical animal, but recent investigation has revealed that it was an animal a size smaller than the elephant, very much like the rhinoceros, sometimes called the wild bull. Vicious and brutal, every one of them was a killer. And the thing that identified them was the fact that they had *one horn*. “Thou hast heard

me from the horns of the unicorns” – *uni* means one – one horn: To me, my beloved, that is remarkable indeed, because the cross on which the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified was not the shaped cross that we see today. We think of a cross made of an upright with a crosspiece. Nowhere does Scripture so describe it.

There are two Greek words that are translated by the English word cross. One of them is the word *stauros*. You find it used in several places. For instance:

Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. (Matthew 27:40)

The word cross is *stauros*, meaning one piece. It is interesting how accurate Scripture is, but how tradition has woven into it our thinking. Paul used the word *stauros* when he wrote:

For the preaching of the cross [stauros] is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18)

The second Greek word is *xulon*, which is translated by the English word cross or tree. It simply means a piece of wood. Paul also used this word:

And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree [xulon], and laid him in a sepulchre. (Acts 13:29)

They took Him down from the tree! Does he mean an upright with a crosspiece?

Now I am perfectly willing to go along with the popularly accepted shape of a cross, but for the sake of accuracy and to appreciate the exactness of this psalm, we need to brush aside tradition for a moment. Jesus said, “Thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns [the cross]. Into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

Another thing that amazes me is that this word *xulon*, translated “tree” or “cross,” is mentioned in the twenty-second chapter of Revelation as the tree of life! I believe that the tree on which Jesus died will be there, alive, throughout the endless ages of eternity, to let you and me know what it cost to redeem us.

Now when we come to the twenty-second verse of this psalm, we see a radical change, a bifurcation. We have had the sufferings of Christ described for us, now we see the glory that should follow.

I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee. (Psalm 22:22)

I think that He said this entire psalm on the cross. He did not die defeated, for when He reached the very end He said that this is the gospel that will be witnessed to. “I will declare thy name unto my brethren.” And I see Peter in the midst of the Sanhedrin, composed of both Pharisees and Sadducees, saying to them, “There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). I will declare thy name unto my brethren.

Today Shalt Thou Be With Me in Paradise (Luke 23:43)

My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation: I will pay my vows before them that fear him. The meek shall eat and be satisfied: they shall praise the LORD that seek him: your heart shall live forever. (Psalm 22:25, 26)

The thief on the cross said, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” Christ says, “I’ll pay my vows: today shalt thou be with me in paradise.” The redeemed shall be there to praise, and that includes the thief He was taking with Him that very day. Although he was a man unfit to even live down here, according to Rome’s standard, the Lord Jesus makes him fit for heaven by His death on the cross.

It Is Finished (John 19:30)

There is a seventh word; it is His last.

They shall come, and shall declare his righteousness unto a people that shall be born, that he hath done this. (Psalm 22:31)

“To a people that shall be born” includes you, my friend.

They shall declare *His* righteousness – not your righteousness, for God says it is as filthy rags in His sight. How will they declare His righteousness? “That he hath done this.” Some would translate it, “It is finished,” the last word He spoke on the cross. And when He said it, it was but one word – *Tetelestai!* Finished! Your redemption is a completed package, and He presents it to you wrapped up with everything in it. He doesn’t want you to bring your do-it-yourself kit along. He does not need that. When He died on the cross He provided a righteousness that would satisfy a holy God. All He asks of you is to receive this package, this gift of God, which is eternal life in Christ Jesus.

If you reject it, God must treat you as He treated His Son when He cried, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” I am not here to argue about the temperature of hell; it will be hell for any man to be forsaken of God. Jesus Christ went through it that you might *never* have to utter that cry.

Psalm 22 reveals the heart of our Savior as He was made a sin offering in our behalf. He completed the transaction in triumph. He offers to us a finished redemption. We never shall be worthy of it, we cannot earn it, we cannot buy it – we must receive it as a gift. Almost two thousand years ago the Lord Jesus Christ did all that was needed to save us.

It is *done!*
Tetelestai!
Finished!