

# Psalm 22

## Hope in Anguish

**An exercise in Bible-handling principles,  
especially that of OT control on NT texts**

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# Psalm 22 (ESV)

To the choirmaster: according to The Doe of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.

## Anguished prayer

<sup>1</sup> My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from saving me, from the  
words of my groaning?

<sup>2</sup> O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,  
and by night, but I find no rest.

## Trust

<sup>3</sup> Yet you are holy,  
enthroned on the praises of Israel.

<sup>4</sup> In you our fathers trusted;  
they trusted, and you delivered them.

<sup>5</sup> To you they cried and were rescued;  
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

## Anguished prayer

<sup>6</sup> But I am a worm and not a man,  
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.

<sup>7</sup> All who see me mock me;  
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;

<sup>8</sup> 'He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him;  
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!'

## Trust

<sup>9</sup> Yet you are he who took me from the womb;  
you made me trust you at my mother's breasts.

<sup>10</sup> On you was I cast from my birth,  
and from my mother's womb you have been my  
God.

## Anguished prayer

<sup>11</sup> Be not far from me, for trouble is near,  
and there is none to help.

<sup>12</sup> Many bulls encompass me;  
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

<sup>13</sup> they open wide their mouths at me,  
like a ravening and roaring lion.

<sup>14</sup> 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;

<sup>15</sup> my strength is dried up like a potsherd,  
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;  
you lay me in the dust of death.

<sup>16</sup> For dogs encompass me;  
a company of evildoers encircles me;  
they have pierced my hands and feet—

<sup>17</sup> I can count all my bones—  
they stare and gloat over me;

<sup>18</sup> they divide my garments among them,  
and for my clothing they cast lots.

<sup>19</sup> But you, O LORD, do not be far off!  
O you my help, come quickly to my aid!

<sup>20</sup> Deliver my soul from the sword,  
my precious life from the power of the dog!

## Supreme hope

<sup>21</sup> Save me from the mouth of the lion!  
You have rescued me from the horns of the wild  
oxen!

<sup>22</sup> I will tell of your name to my brothers;  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

<sup>23</sup> 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!

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> From you comes my praise in the great  
congregation;  
my vows I will perform before those who fear  
him.

<sup>26</sup> The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek him shall praise the LORD!  
May your hearts live for ever!

<sup>27</sup> All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the LORD,  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before you.

<sup>28</sup> For kingship belongs to the LORD,  
and he rules over the nations.

<sup>29</sup> All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the  
dust,  
even the one who could not keep himself alive.

<sup>30</sup> Posterity shall serve him;  
it shall be told of the Lord to the coming  
generation;

<sup>31</sup> they shall come and proclaim his righteousness  
to a people yet unborn,  
that he has done it.

Psalm 22 is widely known, not surprisingly, as the Psalm of the Cross, containing as it does its unmistakable intimations of Christ's suffering and death, 1,000 years ahead of time. Quite understandably, and entirely profitably, it has been the subject of Good Friday meditations for ages past. It would be a foolish Bible-teacher indeed who sought to deny the propriety or legitimacy of reading Psalm 22 as prophetically looking forward to the passion of our Lord. God most emphatically knew, when King David sang and penned these verses, even if David himself didn't, that David's suffering would foreshadow Christ's. God knew back then (and would keep) his promise to bring 'great David's greater Son' on to the world-stage to bring about the ultimate fulfilment of all David represented in God's great plan to redeem the fallen world. Psalm 22 looks forward to God's ordained purposes reaching their goal in Christ and his cross. The Reformer John Calvin agrees:

*In short, there is no doubt that Christ, in uttering this exclamation upon the cross, manifestly showed, that although David here bewails his own distresses, this psalm was composed under the influence of the Spirit of prophecy concerning David's King and Lord.<sup>1</sup>*

Nonetheless, we must concede with Calvin that David thought he was writing about himself and his own life. He was lamenting his own suffering, and was struggling to maintain patient faith in the God he knew and had always trusted, in the face of some ghastly experience – we know not what it was – that felt, for him, to be the suffering of a condemned man. Hauntingly described in some graphic detail (the bones out of joint, the pierced hands and feet, the parched mouth, and much more), David's anguished agonies lend the psalm a sorrowful air, and this has led many Bible-commentators and preachers to speak of despair and desolation. And given that Christ in his own agony quotes v.1 of the psalm, in Matthew's and Mark's passion narratives, this cry of our Lord from the cross, '*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*', has been described often and emphatically as his great 'cry of dereliction'. For example, the popular writer Tim Chester, in *Delighting in the Trinity*, speaks of Jesus as 'forsaken by God ... abandoned by His Father ... they are torn apart ... God is divided from God'.<sup>2</sup> Astonishingly, he does this without any reference at all to Psalm 22. And further, because Christ's cry can easily be taken at face value to indicate an abandonment of God the Son by God the Father, Christian commentators have frequently deduced that the moment of his cry was the point at which Christ bore our sins and knew a real separation (in some sense) from his heavenly Father.

But is this so certain? I suggest not. In the paragraphs below, we look rather more carefully at both Psalm 22 and Christ's cry, and conclude that dogmatic declarations about an actual dereliction of the Son by the Father are thoroughly unsafe. We shall see that 'God divided against God' assertions strike against orthodox Christian doctrines of the unity, and thus indivisibility, of the Godhead, and against the orthodox Christian doctrine of the 'hypostatic union' of the human and divine natures and wills of Christ, whereby it is insisted that there cannot be any conflict of interests between Jesus the man and God the Son. Chester and others, I submit, transgress orthodox theology by their exegetical naivety.

It's not a trivial matter to raise a question mark over the 'dereliction' point of view, and indeed I shall be hesitant, though resolute. I shall suggest in this paper that Jesus' cry cannot be understood simplistically and merely as a cry of dereliction in the sense usually understood,

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary on Psalm 22.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Chester, *Delighting in the Trinity* (Good Book Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2010), 65-66. In this passage Chester quotes Donald Macleod's speculations: 'Jesus was left God-less, with no perception of His own Sonship' (*A Faith to Live By* (Mentor, 1998), 130-1).

for the very reason that David's own cry wasn't one – I seek to show below that David does not seem to be out of fellowship with his God as he offloads his anguish; or at least I wish to add a fresh perspective on the debate. For on reading Psalm 22, we soon see that we find abundant hope, not despair, in the psalm, and thus (of course!) in our understanding of the cross; and we shall concede that there is certainly anguish and distress on David's and Christ's lips. But jumping immediately and naively to the 'this is the sin-bearing moment' conclusion, without visiting Psalm 22, inevitably neglects the supreme note of hope, and impoverishes our exposition of the cry. We shall visit the psalm without in the slightest bit weakening or compromising our doctrine of the sin-bearing cross of Christ. In the pages ahead we shall be studying Psalm 22 itself, hoping to reach an understanding of why Christ quoted this psalm, and to what purpose. Somewhat tentatively, because it's decidedly against the usual trend, I wish to question certain Bible-handling principles employed in the usual quick-and-easy interpretation of Christ's cry. For far too many treatments of Jesus' cry completely ignore the rest of Psalm 22, or indeed all of it, and jump straight to an unqualified conclusion as to this being the exact moment when Christ bore the guilt of our sins. But to over-analyse Christ's cry without visiting the source of the quotation in the psalm, or, sometimes, without even recognising the quotation at all, is decidedly unsafe. Here, then, we look briefly at the NT quotation, and then at length at its OT source, Psalm 22.

An example of ghastly Bible-handling happened in my own hearing a number of years ago when a certain Church of England clergyman, later a bishop, was preaching just before Easter to a large number of impressionable young teenagers, who were hanging on his every word. He was (supposedly) exegeting the cry of Jesus on the cross, *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*, Christ's so-called 'cry of dereliction', and he said with great authority, 'Isn't it comforting that even Jesus lost his faith on the cross?'. These are not the words of a Christian who takes the Bible seriously as God's Word. The speaker was a 'liberal' who didn't seem to have confidence in Christ as the divine Son and Saviour. The comment is not just provocative, but dangerous and rather silly (and disingenuous too, for the speaker knew full well how this verse is regarded in traditional scholarship). We study this cry of Jesus now, but ask some serious questions about the traditional way of understanding it, ensuring that we have done full justice to its OT control.

**Matthew 27:46** *[A]bout the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'* (parallel Mark 15:34).

**Psalm 22:1** *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?*

The clergyman, later bishop, who said, to his disgrace, 'Isn't it comforting that even Jesus lost his faith on the cross?', evidently didn't know his Bible, or he did know it, but purposely did violence to good Bible-handling principles. Apparently he wasn't aware of Psalm 22; or if he was, he didn't know how to read the Bible in the light of good exegetical principles (or he was deliberately obfuscating the truth) – either that, or he'd long since, as the 'liberal' sceptic that he was, been blinded to the Word of God. To say what he said is to do biblical interpretation by speculative guess (at best). And guess, at that, founded on already firmly entrenched prejudice. For this man almost certainly knew the historically understood doctrine of substitutionary atonement; almost certainly he had long ago given up believing in the reality of sin and judgement; almost certainly he'd long since, therefore, denied the sin-bearing death of Christ; almost certainly he knew that the standard interpretation of *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'* has to do with the traditional doctrine of the cross – as historically

understood by all Bible-believing Christians; and almost certainly, therefore, he had deliberately set his face against it and dreamt up his own understanding of the verse (in common with all other 'liberals'). He was a liberal who denied the truth and rejected the traditional view, and who wouldn't even acknowledge what the latter is.

Interestingly, other liberals have more courage; for instance, a few liberals have the honesty to admit that the Bible clearly does teach substitution, and that this cry from the cross is part of the biblical testimony for the doctrine of substitution, but they are open in declaring that they are unable to believe either the Bible or the doctrine (the liberal scholar Maurice Wiles, I believe, in admirable fairness says exactly this). That position at least has integrity.

We, on the other hand will not give up on sin, judgement or the sin-bearing death of Christ. However, we too must not bring our own presuppositions to the Bible when we are seeking to understand it, particularly at points where there isn't immediate clarity. So we can't say, 'We believe in the sin-bearing substitutionary atonement of Christ; therefore "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" must mean substitutionary atonement.' That is a circular argument, and is just as guilty of doing interpretation by guess or by preconceived notions or by initial impression. We do, fully and absolutely, believe in substitutionary atonement, but this doctrine is the conclusion aggregated from the entire biblical witness to the doctrine (a corporate witness and consensus amongst Bible-honouring Christian teachers down through the ages) – it can't just be 'proof-texted' out of a single verse; rather, '*My God, my God ...*' must be exegeted *in context*, including (and especially) in the context of its OT control.

The point of what we're doing here is to learn what to do when we encounter a NT text which quotes or clearly alludes to the OT (or which quotes or alludes to an earlier NT text – e.g. to the teaching of Jesus). Here, a NT text (a saying of Christ) quotes the OT (Psalm 22). And the first lesson is that we must take note of the quotation – we can't ignore it and simply interpret the later text as if it is not 'controlled' by the earlier text being quoted or alluded to. If we make this mistake then we shall almost certainly be doing interpretation by guess (at best) or interpretation by prejudice (worse). The errant clergyman was doing the latter.

But suppose we too resort simply to guesswork. In the case in point we shall observe the cry of Jesus on the cross, '*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*', and our first guess will likely be that it's just what it's usually known as, namely a *cry of dereliction*, by which is usually meant that on the cross Jesus (on this view) was separated from his Father in some sense; and this separation, or dereliction, or abandonment (to use various terms commonly used) was the direct result of his sin-bearing death. And not only was this objectively true, it is supposed, but subjectively also in the conscious experience of Jesus as he hung on the cross, so that he (on this analysis) *felt* abandoned by his Father as he bore the shame and guilt and punishment of our sins, and cried out accordingly. (Note, I am peppering the foregoing with disclaimers such as 'on this analysis' and 'on this view' and 'it is supposed', not because I am about to declare the standard view definitely incorrect, but because it's not legitimate to *start* with an assumption of the view we are committed to – rather, we must establish it by honourable Bible-handling.)

Now there may well be some truth in this conclusion about the *cry of dereliction*, but we must be very careful. First, even if by this interpretative method (i.e., guess) we do arrive at the correct interpretation, it is still nonetheless inexcusable to bypass the OT control, as we shall see below. But secondly, *is* this the right interpretation (that Jesus *felt abandoned*)? It is far from *necessarily* so. We really must be very careful not to make the Bible say more than it does. And one area where the Bible is far more silent than is usually acknowledged is the exact nature of the conscious relationship between the incarnate Son and his Father in heaven, from

his birth through to his ascension. There are some clues, especially in John's gospel (and we forget not his prayer life), but it has not been given to us to know exactly how Jesus of Nazareth related in his own consciousness to the Father at any stage of his incarnate life (or suffering and death). We must not make dogmatic assertions, therefore, that claim too much about how Jesus 'felt', either subjectively or objectively.

Some things can be definitively said of the relationship between Father and Son, of course. Not least, the Father is the Father of the Son, and the Son the Son of the Father – has not this been true from all eternity? Oh yes! For if we cast doubt upon this then we become Arians, denying the eternal sonship of the Son. Did not Jerome lament this: *'The whole world groaned, and was astonished to find itself Arian!'*, granting the exception of just Athanasius, Hilarius and perhaps a few others?<sup>3</sup> For the catastrophe of Arianism is not *only* that the Son is on this reckoning a creature, but that in eternity the Father was not always Father! We are in danger, therefore, if ever we think that the Son, the *monogenēs*, the best beloved Son, *'begotten, not made'*, ever was not, or subsequently was not, the Son of the Father. And what of the love of the Father for the Son, and the Son for the Father? Is not God love? And if he is, was it ever not true? Hardly! Admittedly, some scholars insist (by guess) that the love between Father and Son pertains only to the incarnate Son; but can this idea hold water in the light of the attributes of God being eternal attributes, including his love? So we ask, did the Father ever cease loving the Son, or the Son the Father? Did God the Father withhold his love as the Son hung on the cross? Did the Son withhold his love from the Father? That would be a very dangerous doctrine. Our doctrine of God's love is not at odds with our doctrine of God's judgement; so indeed we understand that the Son bore the judgement of his Father, but that's not the same as supposing he ever felt other than in the embrace of his Father's love.

Thus we decline to differentiate between the love and fellowship that inheres between the Father and the incarnate Son in his humanity, on the one hand, and the love between the Father and the pre-incarnate Son in eternity, on the other. The orthodox doctrine of the hypostatic union supports this. For in Christ there are two natures, divine and human, and two corresponding wills, but each pair in perfect union. Therefore we cannot drive any wedge between, say, the will of Jesus of Nazareth in Gethsemane and the will of the eternal Son at that moment. And we cannot declare the love of the incarnate Son for the Father, and the Father for the Son, on the occasion of Jesus' prayer in John 17 (see v.23-26), to be in a different category or have a different quality from that which pertains in eternity.

In any case, although from the cumulative biblical witness we conclude (yes, indeed, we do) that the death of Christ on the cross was a sacrificial, penal, sin-bearing, substitutionary, atoning death, we shall do well not to try to pin this down too dogmatically to a specific moment or period of time at Calvary. Suppose, for instance, that we definitively conclude that the so-called cry of dereliction marks the actual moment, or the conclusion of the period (the three hours of darkness, some would suppose), when Jesus bore the wrath of the Father for our sins. We shall get into trouble if we do. For was it not the *death* of Christ on the cross that takes away our sin? Yes. But if the wrath of God and his judgement on our sin fell fully and finally and effectively on Christ *before* his death, so that it was all accomplished *before* he died, how can it be his death which saves us? Is this just a semantic quibble? I think not. The Bible makes much of the *death* of our Saviour. It's his death, his atoning blood, which is effective to save us, his shed blood being a metaphor for death. And although Christ's 'death' might be a

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<sup>3</sup> Jerome, *Dialogue Against the Luciferians* (c.379), §19. See also Richard Field, *Of the Church* (Oxford: 1628), Bk. 1, Ch.10, 15; also William Wisheart, *Theologia, or Discourses of God*, Vol. II, Sermon CXI (Edinburgh: 1716), 876, or (Paisley: 1786), 382. A helpful comment on the one-time prevalence of Arianism is in Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Hendrickson, 2003), vol I, 144-5.

comprehensive term that includes his prior suffering, it can hardly be held that his death is only that prior suffering and excludes his actual dying!

We really must not dissect this event which takes hours into individual moments and think to know exactly what happened in the divine economy at each one. Even if there was an 'abandonment' in some sense (and I believe there was indeed, *in some sense*), nonetheless Jesus is still addressing his Father as 'Father' after his 'cry of dereliction' and before his actual death ('*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!*', Luke 23:46). And what of Christ's 'descent into hell'? Earlier generations of theologians made much of this as an essential part (at least) of the atonement – some people say (rather crudely and simplistically) that Jesus took our sins to hell and left them there; this notion doesn't usually commend itself to Bible scholars, as it is speculative, is unsubstantiated within its immediate context, and rests upon a fanciful doctrine of hell; indeed it's my belief that we can't deduce any doctrine of Christ's post-death 'ministry' in 'hell' or wherever, and that the 1 Peter 3:19 conundrum can be explained other than by being wrested to this cause. These supposed doctrines (guesses) claim more than the Bible says. It's not appropriate for us to pretend to know in detail just what happened in the divine economy at every moment of Christ's passion, in a way that goes beyond the Bible itself. Are we to say, with these over-analysers, that part of the atonement happened on the cross, evoking the cries then and there, '*It is finished*' (John 19:30) and '*My God, my God ...*', and part happened at and after the actual death (the 'descent into hell'), but with Jesus being in some sort of fellowship with his Father in between as he confidently says '*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!*'?

Please, reader, do not mishear me here: I'm not saying it's *not* true that Jesus *felt* abandoned at this particular moment (my conclusion below is that he felt abandoned just as David felt abandoned – qualitatively and quantitatively – no more, no less; but we're going to have to visit Psalm 22 if we're to know how David felt, and thus how Jesus felt); rather, I'm saying we simply cannot pin down each moment and think to know the conscious experience of Jesus in more detail than is given to us. It's actually much better to view various of the sayings of Jesus on the cross – '*I thirst*' (John 19:28); '*My God, my God ...*'; '*It is finished*'; and '*Father, into your hands ...*' – as commentaries on the entire event, and not just on the various experiences and objective realities of the relevant immediate moment.

So rather than take a stab at a guess as to what Christ's cry in Matthew 27:46 or Mark 15:34 means, we'll go now to Psalm 22. This is important. When, in the NT, we encounter a direct or indirect quotation or clear allusion to an OT scripture, we go straight there. Quite often there will be no direct clue in the NT passage as to exactly what the quotation means there in the NT, or it'll at least be ambiguous sometimes (another example would be '*by his wounds you have been healed*' in 1 Peter 2:24, which has been taken by some to mean physical healing as one benefit of the cross, but by others as spiritual healing; a question only resolvable by recourse to its OT control in Isaiah 53:5 – for which see the postscript to this study). But the clue to discovering its meaning in the NT passage is to find its meaning in the OT passage where it's quoted from.

So what does '*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*' mean on the lips of Jesus on the cross? Answer: it means there in the NT what it means in the OT, in Psalm 22, though nuanced by its fulfilment in Christ and the gospel. This very last point is important: we go to Psalm 22, and work out what the quotation meant there on the lips of David. Then on the lips of Jesus it means not a *re-run* of David, but a *fulfilment* of David, because Christ and the gospel of Christ in the NT brings the OT (in general), and the role of King David (here in particular), and the OT promise of a new Davidic King, to fulfilment; the OT is incomplete without the NT, but the NT is incomprehensible without the OT – 'The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New

revealed (or, better, fulfilled)' (old adage). Of course, in the NT the quotation will acquire additional facets and nuances supplied by its own context there; but neglecting (or being ignorant of) the OT control will seriously impoverish our understanding of the scripture in question – indeed, we can hardly begin without it.

Given the above remarks, we must insist that we cannot know what 'My God, my God ...' means on the lips of Jesus only by considering the Matthew 27 or Mark 15 passage; that is, we won't fully understand what 'My God, my God ...' means on the lips of Jesus unless we turn to Psalm 22 and discover what it means on the lips of David. David is a 'type of Christ'; he is the 'Son' of God (Psalm 2:7, 'You are my Son ...', said by God of the anointed king of God's people), and is thus God's 'messiah' or 'anointed one' for his own time; he is the forerunner, or 'type', who will be fully fulfilled in Christ (the 'antitype', the ultimate 'messiah', and the ultimate 'Son of God', who is also, unlike David, God the Son).<sup>4</sup> Given this, our conclusion will be that the meaning of the cry on Jesus' lips must be sought in its meaning on David's lips.

So to the remarkable Psalm 22 we turn. Spurgeon writes lyrically of Psalm 22,

It is the photograph of our Lord's saddest hours, the record of his dying words, the lachrymatory of his last tears, the memorial of his expiring joys.<sup>5</sup>

Known sometimes as the Psalm of the Cross, it abounds in phraseology uncannily reminiscent of the events of the cross of Christ. Indeed, commentators agree that some of its phrases and clauses defy interpretation of any sort until Christ fulfils them on the cross – for example: {i} the piercing of the hands and feet in v.16; interestingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the medieval Masoretes (the Jewish custodians of the Hebrew scriptures, who 'pointed' it – i.e., supplied the vowels to the previously unpointed, solely consonantal text) appear to have challenged this translation, arguably to avoid the Christian fulfilment motif, by 'pointing' the Hebrew text differently from how the LXX understood it; likewise {ii} the casting of lots for the clothing in v.18 is fulfilled at Calvary, as also {iii} the parched mouth, v.15, {iv} the bones out of joint, v.14, and {v} the mocking of the onlookers, v.7.

When Christ, hanging on the cross at the ninth hour at the end of the three hours of darkness, utters the so-called 'cry of dereliction' of Psalm 22:1, he is crying out to the listening world (including us, listening twenty centuries later). His cry is this: 'the prophecy of Psalm 22 is being fulfilled, here, now, in me! I am the new David ushering in my kingdom (as you already know from my ministry – or should do), and David's cry in the psalm finds its full and final fulfilment here, now, in me.' Spurgeon was right, not simply because certain aspects of Psalm 22 bear an uncanny resemblance to details of Calvary, but because Christ himself effectively and openly declared in his cry that Psalm 22 was all about him – and not simply about him in some generalised sense, but all about him then and there as he hung on the cross, and about the purpose of him being there. That is what Psalm 22:1 is doing on the lips of Jesus.

Which brings us to another important point: if the NT quotes the OT, then generally, as a Bible-handling principle, we understand the intention to be to draw the hearers' (and later readers') attention not just to the single verse or short passage being quoted, but to the whole unit (one or more paragraphs, perhaps, or maybe a whole chapter or more, according to context) of

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<sup>4</sup> Although the two terms, 'the Son of God' and 'God the Son', apply to Jesus Christ fully and unequivocally, we must not make the mistake of confusing them semantically. 'God the Son', uniquely attributable to Jesus Christ, denotes the second person of the divine Trinity; but the term 'Son of God' denotes the anointed (i.e., specially appointed) Davidic King, David and his successors (as per Psalm 2), and ultimately fulfilled in Christ. Originally, of course, Israel was termed God's Son, as in Hosea 11:1.

<sup>5</sup> Commentary on Psalm 22 in Charles Spurgeon's *The Treasury of David*.



which it's part. We go, therefore, to the verse being quoted, and look at how it in turn fits into its own context – we widen our gaze to the whole passage it falls in. Here this means the whole psalm of course – in directly quoting v.1, the intention of Jesus is most likely to say that the whole of Psalm 22 is being fulfilled on the cross, not just that v.1 is being fulfilled.

We should ask ourselves at this point, is it so clearly the case, as is usually assumed, that Jesus is personally addressing his heavenly Father in issuing this cry? I certainly believe so, for as argued above the attributes of God are eternally true. But for the record, an alternative suggestion is that Jesus was merely quoting Psalm 22 for the benefit of his hearers (including us), in the sense noted above that he was declaring the Psalm as being fulfilled in himself here at Calvary. Advocates of this suggestion argue that if Jesus were personally addressing his Father then he would address him as 'Father', as he usually does. Alternatively it is suggested that Jesus doesn't address God as 'Father' because he is out of communion with his father at that point – but again, this enters the realm of speculation as to exactly how the Father and the Son were relating to one another at each individual moment. This carries many dangers. But on the other hand it may be argued that Jesus must use the term 'My God' for the very reason that he is deliberately quoting the psalm. So he addresses his Father in the same way as David did, using David's words. One way or the other, we must conclude that the deliberate quotation of the psalm is of crucial importance. As to exactly whether or how the Son and the Father were relating to each other at this point, we will not take a firm view – I have argued that we will never have more than a glimpse of this experiential relationship. If I am right that Psalm 22 is a psalm of supreme hope and confidence of eventual vindication (more on this later), then he will have the final word as Psalm 22 prophesies in its finale (*'they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it'*, v.31). Indeed, the resurrection completely vindicates Jesus, however much the crowds, apparently ignorant of the prophetic nature of Psalm 22, mock Jesus on the cross – *'This man is calling Elijah', 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him'*, Matthew 27:47,49.

So is v.1 a cry of dereliction on David's part? Well, Yes, and No! First, Yes, David feels he's been providentially 'abandoned', not totally or utterly, for God never so abandons his beloved; but in the sense of his being consigned by God and in God's purposes to his present predicament; he has asked to be spared it (as Jesus did in Luke 22:42, *'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done'* – so David, praying, is a 'type' of Christ praying in Gethsemane), but God has not delivered him from it as requested (see, for example, v.2, *'O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest'*). It's interesting to note that the verb translated 'answer' (most English versions) in v.2 is the same as the verb translated 'rescued' ('saved' in some versions) in v.21 (*'You have rescued me'*). The usual translation of the verb is 'answer'. But in v.21 the translators rightly interpret this in a fuller sense ('rescued' or 'saved'), though we wonder why they didn't do likewise in v.2, rendering it 'you do not save me'.

This brings us to an important Bible-handling principle: verbs in the Hebrew mind-set very often carry far more meaning than they do to the western mind. So 'to hear' doesn't just mean that the sound waves have reached a pair of eardrums to be decoded in the brain – rather, it means that the hearer has heard and also taken due notice and has responded appropriately. To 'answer' means more than just to give a verbal response; indeed, as here, there may be no verbal response at all – but here, David is not complaining simply about *silence* from God; he is praying about his dismay and perplexity that God has not (yet) *taken action* to save him on this occasion, and David is suffering hugely right now. Hebrew verbs should very frequently be afforded far greater depth of meaning than a western mind is naturally disposed to grant.

Psalm 22:21 exemplifies this – written from the Hebrew mind-set, it understands ‘answered’ as ‘saved’ or ‘rescued’.

The cry certainly is true anguish – the suffering described resembles an execution, not an illness or other affliction. But also, *No*, it’s not a cry of dereliction; there is no sense that David feels out of touch with his God, or out of fellowship with him; he is talking to his God throughout this psalm, and although his prayer is a cry of dismay, it is not a cry of despair (and exactly the same, therefore, must be concluded of Jesus on the cross). And it is indeed a prayer – a prayer by a believer to his God. The whole psalm is laden with expressions of trust in God to work it all out some way – it’s a psalm of hope! Indeed the portions of the psalm describing the anguish of David’s suffering and execution are easily matched in quantity and emphasis by the notes of hope and confidence.

In the text of the psalm at the beginning of this paper above, I have added a suggested structure for the psalm. My structure is not holy writ, of course, but it’s instructive to note how the psalm alternates three times between prayerful expressions of anguish and dismay, along with continued pleas for rescue (‘anguished prayer’), and worshipful expressions of trust and hope (‘trust’ or ‘supreme hope’). Why David’s confidence despite his predicament? Because of God’s praiseworthiness. See, for example, v.3, ‘... *you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel*’. And why is this so? Because, v.4-5, God has a consistent, proven track record of rescuing his people: ‘*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*’. David, too, had consistently trusted in God: v.8, ‘*He trusts in the LORD*’, and v.9-10, ‘*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*’.

On the strength of this lifelong trust in God’s certain faithfulness he continues to appeal to his God to deliver him (v.19-21, ‘*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 ...! You have rescued me ...!*’). This is so even though up until this point God has not answered that prayer (v.1-2, ‘*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer*’). And the continued appeal is a confident one, despite the earlier frustration at God’s having declined thus far to answer – David is confident that God will rescue him, so much so that he puts his certain *future* deliverance in the *past* tense (a literary device known sometimes as the ‘proleptic’ past tense) in v.21b, which actually reads, word-by-word, ‘*you have answered me from the horns of the wild oxen!*’ (NIV margin *heard*, NIV text *saved me*, ESV text *rescued me*); likewise in v.24, ‘*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*’. This Hebrew literary device, the ‘proleptic’ past, putting a future certain event in the past tense to imply confidence, is prominent here – the Hebrews can use it thus because they have a great God of whose reliability and covenant faithfulness and mercy they can be completely sure – and they know it; and here David knows it, even in his ghastly predicament where God keeps him waiting – and trusting. Hope (and accompanying trust and assurance – cf. Hebrews 11:1)<sup>6</sup> is all over the place in this psalm – and confident hope is the psalm’s final acclamation: it resoundingly ends the psalm, as we shall see.

This is anticipatory trust. David is utterly confident that God is completely praiseworthy – ‘*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,*

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<sup>6</sup> Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1).

*all you offspring of Israel!*' (v.22-23). God ultimately will be seen to be good, and to be absolutely committed to his own, as in v.25-31:

*'From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will perform before those who fear him. The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD! May your hearts live forever! 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. All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, even the one who could not keep himself alive. Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it.'*

Despite his perplexity (and anguish – but not absolute dereliction) that God is not rescuing him now, here at the point when he writes this psalm David knows that God will vindicate his name ultimately by a deliverance from his affliction (even though his affliction looks like it entails death!). This is, again, hope! The affliction must be in the purposes of God, but so also is eventual rescue from it (v.24, *'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'*). By whatever means this should eventually come to pass, David prophetically proclaims that such will this vindication be that not only will he be alive and praising God for it (v.22, *'I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you'* – resurrection!), and not only will all Israel, present and future generations, come to praise their God (v.23, *'You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him'*), but the whole earth too, in accordance, of course, with God's promise to Abraham; and, picking up the gospel imperative from Jesus Christ that the good news shall be preached to the nations. This vindication of the suffering of David will have a thoroughgoing evangelistic thrust! (v.27, *'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'*). Yes, indeed, although David is truly God's king for his time, his kingship is a regent-kingship – the one true King is, and never will be other than, Yahweh himself (cf. Yahweh, the King of glory, in Psalm 24); but when Psalm 22 is fulfilled in Christ, the true King comes bringing his Kingdom-rule. And this spreading of the gospel of God will continue down through the generations: *'Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it'* (v.30-31).

So we see indeed that this psalm is remarkably prophetic in its depiction of David's affliction at God's providential hand. The suffering king, we remember, is God's regent on earth, God's 'right-hand man' – see, for example, Psalm 80:17, *'But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!'*; or Psalm 110:1, *'The LORD says to my Lord: "sit at my right hand ..."'*. This latter is quoted in the NT, of course, as being fulfilled in Christ, which is the whole point of our study of Psalm 22: Luke 20:42, *'For David himself says in the Book of Psalms, "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand ..."'*; compare Luke 22:69, *'But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God'*. He, the suffering king in Psalm 22, is providentially given over by his God to a horrible execution by dreadful enemies from which there is no immediate deliverance, but ultimately there is a vindication of such gloriousness that the whole world is to hear of it! In the midst of his suffering the king is able to declare that his God will bring it all right, and the world must know! Is not this fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ? Of course it is! In the midst of his suffering our Lord knows the full burden of his crucifixion just as David had known the burden and distress of his suffering, but even in his anguish Christ is able to declare,

by borrowing the words of this psalm, that God is going to vindicate his name; or to put it into a modern idiom, Christ is essentially saying from the cross, 'My enemies think they're ridding the world of me – but no! Just watch this space!'

Jesus' cry is a cry of anguish (but not a cry of complete dereliction, as already argued, because it wasn't such for David), in that he knows his Father is consigning him to this suffering in the divine purpose (Luke 22:42, '*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done*'). There will be no rescue there and then (but just wait a while and see what happens!). But it cannot be legitimate to extrapolate this in a way that the Bible will not allow – we simply cannot conclude unequivocally that the moment of Jesus' cry was the moment he bore our sins (as some do say, doing biblical interpretation by guess). We truly do believe he bore our sins in his body on the cross – we make no mistake about it! But this is not spelt out in Psalm 22. It may be that Jesus' cry does reflect this in some sense, but we are wary of moment-by-moment analysis of the cross-event, and we do not make the Bible say clearly what it does not clearly say. Elsewhere, yes, in the total witness of scripture, we believe that penal substitution is taught, and thoroughly so. But we can't legitimately wrest this out of any single scripture that seems convenient to us – many non-negotiable, central-core Christian doctrines are established as the corporate conclusion of Christian theology by the cumulative witness of much and varied scripture, abstracting from multiple data. We recall the 'corporate witness' maxim of Vincent de Lérins:<sup>7</sup> our faith is 'that which has been believed *everywhere, always, by all*'. But the corporate witness of scripture is one thing, proof-texting quite another. Psalm 22 is content to proclaim simply but firmly an affliction (an execution) suffered in anguish but in God's purpose by the king, but with a glorious outcome where the 'executed' king lives again to declare the praise of Yahweh! How can we not see this as prophetic of Christ's passion and resurrection?! This is hope! Hope piled high upon hope! Hope like Abraham's in Romans 4:18, which actually reads, word for word, '*in hope upon hope*', and not ESV's inept '*hope against hope*',<sup>8</sup> this latter naïve and too-easily-accepted rendering connoting not confident hope but desperate 'hope-which-is-no-hope'.

In the light of our delving into Psalm 22, it's interesting to wonder what the relationship is between this psalm and the much more well-known Psalm 23 that follows it. Psalm 23 is of course almost universally used in a distinctly pietistic sense to give great comfort to struggling Christians. In other words the voice of David in Psalm 23 becomes, in our own often individualised interpretation of it, the voice of 'me'. But the voice of David in Psalm 22 most certainly can't in the first instance, be the voice of 'me' – it's the voice of my Saviour! If it is also true of 'me', this will be because 'I' am 'in Christ' – sharing in his sufferings in a derivative and subsequent sense.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this should cause us to have another look at Psalm 23! Indeed, but that's for another occasion – save to note that, yes, of course it can be applied to 'me', but again, only because 'I' am 'in Christ'. And we can usefully note that the theme of distress, yet in confident hope and assured trust, is to be found in multiple psalms in the vicinity of Psalm 22.

I have recently (at time of writing this) heard a radio discussion programme about the Dead Sea scrolls in which one participant (a renowned scholar) advanced his belief that Jesus didn't realise he was going to be crucified. And the reason he gave for thinking that? Answer, yes, you've guessed it, it was Jesus' cry on the cross, '*My God, my God, why have you forsaken*

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<sup>7</sup> In his *Commonitory* of c.434.

<sup>8</sup> 'hope ... against hope' (RSV), 'against all hope ... in hope' (NIV), 'against hope ... in hope' (KJV).

<sup>9</sup> Witness also the Apostle Paul: *Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church* (Colossians 1:24).

me? This scholar, having rejected the concept that Jesus of Nazareth was the true divine messiah, and thus having rejected Jesus as the great fulfilment of all the covenantal promises of the OT, had no other explanation for this quotation from Psalm 22. This renowned scholar thought the cross of Christ took our Saviour by surprise. Oh, dear! Hang your heads in shame, you renowned scholar, and you, the liberal clergyman-made-bishop, whom we met earlier!

In conclusion, although we affirm indeed that Christ on the cross bore the full weight of the curse of sin in himself, dying in our place as our penal substitute, and that this is certainly reflected somehow in his conscious experience as he hung there and died, and in his seven 'words from the cross', we cannot go further than the Bible goes and declare unequivocally that Christ 'felt' estranged from his Father at any particular point (let alone draw conclusions about objective realities to do with the relationship between the Father and the Son then and there or at any other time of Christ's sojourn on earth). Rather, we read Christ's alleged 'cry of dereliction' as a confident but anguished assertion that in him, there and then as he hung on the cross, bearing our sins, Psalm 22 found its intended and long-awaited fulfilment. His cry amounts to the claim, 'in me, here and now, Psalm 22 is happening, it is being fulfilled'.

But Psalm 22 is a psalm of *hope*, albeit a cry of anguish, and is prayed in confidence to David's God whom he *trusts* – so Christ's cry of anguish must be in *hope* and *trust* too! See Hebrews 12:2, '*Jesus ... who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*' To cap it all, observe how Psalm 22 ends triumphantly at v.31: '*They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn—for he has done it.*' He has done it! Another use of the Hebrew proleptic past tense. He has done it! Now just how reminiscent is that of Christ's other cry from the cross, '*It is finished!*'?! Both David's psalm and Christ's life end in supreme hope! Hope upon hope! Hope in anguish, but most definitely not despair in dereliction. Hope piled high upon hope!

And less than 48 hours later, the hope is supremely fulfilled:

*'He has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.'*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Peter 1:3.

## Postscript

**1 Peter 2:24-25** *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*<sup>25</sup> *For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

**Isaiah 53:5-6** *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*<sup>6</sup> *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

In exactly the same way as with Christ's 'cry of anguish' on the cross, 1 Peter 2:24-25 can only be adequately interpreted in the light of its OT control, which is Isaiah 53:5-6 (and by extension, the whole of the OT context this appears in, namely the 4<sup>th</sup> Servant Song, or, even wider, the whole servant section of Isaiah, or the whole of Isaiah). In particular, the healing motif of 1 Peter 2:24, '*by his wounds you have been healed*', must be understood in the same manner as *healed* is understood in Isaiah 53 – namely, as the 'healing of the nation of Israel' being promised by the prophets. To reduce *healing* in 1 Peter 2:24 to physical healing is to do interpretation by guess, or by prejudice. It's eisegesis (reading preconceived notions *into* the text), not exegesis (reading God's thoughts *out of* the text). Rather, *healing* in 1 Peter 2:24 means what it means in Isaiah 53:5.

Just as with the 'cry of anguish', so here in 1 Peter, we must read these verses as a confident assertion that 'in Christ, Isaiah 53 has been fulfilled'. Note the 'has been' here, as Peter changes the present tense of Isaiah 53:5d, *we are healed*, to the past tense, *you have been healed*, in order (I suggest) to make a vital point: it is (i.e., has now been) accomplished, 'it is finished', it is now fulfilled in Christ and his cross. Peter has also changed the *we* of Isaiah 53:5-6 (who, there, are the people of God) into *you*, emphasising (I suggest) that 'you, Christian believers, are the new people of God' (a strong theme of 1 Peter generally).

This is only a very brief look at these great verses, in order to give a further illustration of how the OT control moderates our handling of the NT – it preserves us here from flights of fancy which themselves are determined not by honest Bible-handling, but by preconceived notions about Christian expectation of physical healing. This is not, of course, to deny the possibility of physical healing, only to deny that any such doctrine can be derived from 1 Peter 2. This brief dip into this NT verse is just one aspect of a full study. But we'll leave that for another time.

I have written elsewhere examining the 'conundrum' of 1 Peter 3:19.