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The Suffering Christ In The Psalms

I remember the conferences in the city of Belfast when on Easter Monday, from what I am told, upwards to three thousand people would attend those gatherings. They were magnificent. In considering the scriptures, I find that the word “Easter” occurs only once (Acts 12:4). The Greek word translated Easter is “pascha” and is used twenty nine times, but this is the only time it is so translated. In every other occasion it is translated “Passover”. Why it is changed in Acts 12:4 I do not know. However, at this time of year many thousands gather to remember the death and resurrection of our Lord and what times of refreshing they can be. Perhaps it was as he thought on the Passover that the Psalmist wrote certain Psalms, for there are four psalms which particularly relate to the sufferings of the Lord.

If we consider the book of the Psalms, it has been rightly observed that it is divided into five sections, each ending with one of two formula’s. The words “Amen, and Amen” are found at the end of Psalm 41:13; 72:19; and 89:52. The words “Praise ye the LORD” are found at the end of Psalm 106:48 and 150:6. In four of those books of the Psalms there is one Psalm which deals almost exclusively to the sufferings of the Lord.

- a) In Psalm 22 the Lord is presented as:
 - i) The Almighty God who became a baby in total weakness
 - ii) The One who descended from the heights of honour to the depths of deepest humiliation
 - iii) The One who was surrounded with the admiration of celestial hosts became surrounded with gaping bulls
 - iv) The One who had pledged He would never leave man (Duet. 31:6, 8) is Himself forsaken
- b) In Psalm 69 the Lord is presented as:
 - i) The Maker and Maintainer of everything, is deprived of a foothold, and sinking in the deep mire
 - ii) The One who had decreed that it was not good for man to be alone is left without anyone. (v. 20)
- c) In Psalm 88 the Lord is presented as:
 - i) The One who created the thousands of angelic beings, yet is bereft of all companionship and comforters
- d) In Psalm 102 the Lord is presented as:
 - i) The One who knew the blessedness of being the Fellow of God (Zech. 13:7) yet was alone without a place to rest His head. It was a life of exceeding aloneness for none could enter into that which He was knowing and experiencing.
 - 1. His lovely life was lonely because:
 - (a) Pseudo religiosity despised Him when they said: “We be not born of fornication” (Jn. 8:41)
 - (b) Human adamance denounced Him, the belittling of the Lord after He healed the man who was born blind (Jn. 9:29)
 - (c) Fleshy timidity deserted Him when: “They all forsook Him, and fled” (Mk. 14:50)
 - (d) Financial caused one to betray Him, Judas sold Him for thirty pieces of silver” (Matt. 27:3)

Paul could write: “No man stood with me” (2 Tim. 4:16), and how deeply the Lord knew that experience. Alone He:

- (a) Stood against the temptations of Satan (Matt. 4:1-11)
- (b) Prevailed all night in prayer (Lk. 6:12)
- (c) Bore witness to His Messiahship by His works (Jn. 10:25)
- (d) Drank the cup of divine judgment, “The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” (Jn. 18:11).belittling

But in all of these the Lord was with Paul (Jn. 8:29), but at Calvary, in the three hours of darkness, God forsook Christ (Matt. 27:46). This was isolation in intensity.

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As we consider these four Psalms more closely we observe that in each there is a prophetic plaintive prayer of the Lord.

- a) In Psalm 22 it is because of the desolation by God (Psa. 22:1-2, 11, 19-21).
- b) In Psalm 69 it is due to the hatred by enemies (Psa. 69:1); for deliverance (Psa. 69:4); the shame and reproach He was enduring (Psa. 69:14, 19).
- c) In Psalm 88 it is because of His affliction from God (Psa. 88:14-15).
- d) In Psalm 102 it is because of His affliction from God and man. Mention is made of His bones (Psa. 102:3, 5); His heart (Psa. 102:4); His aloneness (Psa. 102:6-7); His sorrows (Psa. 102:9); His plea (Psa. 102:24). The focus for His distress is the afflictions of man and God and man's distancing of Himself from Him is intensified.

Because Psalm 22 is the best known, I will restrict my thoughts to it. The first observation is the use of the pronouns "me", "I", and "my".

- a) Prophetically the Lord will use the pronoun "me" thirteen times (Psa. 22:9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21). As we listen to His deeply plaintive cry, "Be not far from me" (v.11); "haste Thee to help me" (v. 19); "Save me" (v.21); no words can describe the agony and grief it conveys.
- b) Prophetically He will use the pronoun "I" three times (Psa. 22:10, 14, 17) as it conveys His utter weakness, "I am poured out like water".
- c) Prophetically He will use the pronoun "my" ten times. With deepest reverence we would stand at the cross of Calvary and hear His expressions of agonizing grief.
 - i) "Thou art my God from my mother's belly" (v.10)
 - ii) "All my bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels" (v. 14)
 - iii) "My strength is dried up like potsherd; My tongue cleaveth to my jaws" (v.15)
 - iv) "They pierced my hands and my feet" (v.16)
 - v) "They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture" (v.18)
 - vi) "O my strength", (This is now speaking of God for the strength of the Lord is dried up v.19);
 - vii) "Deliver my soul from the sword, my darling from the power of the dog" (v.20).

The Psalmist also speaks of three animals which have varying degrees of viciousness. These indicate the attitude of the men who were the promoters of the sufferings of the Lord. The bulls are described as, "Strong bulls of Bashen" (v.12) which indicates might but void of any mercy. To this is added, "They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and roaring lion (v.13). There is mention of the "dog" (vv. 16, 20) which indicates a savagery which is void of sympathy. The "lion" is mentioned twice (vv. 13, 21) which may suggest callousness without compassion. The unicorn (v.21) we do not know what it is but the mention of its horns indicating a piercing fierceness without feeling. It is against this barbaric manifestation of the heart of man the Lord is described as a "Worm" (v.6).

The Hebrew word translated "worm" is "towla". There are four Hebrew words translated "worm" with varying emphasis. The word "towla" indicates weak and helplessness. It is used to describe Israel (Isa. 41:13-14), the crimson and scarlet of the tabernacle, and of the Lord. It is interesting that the first time "towla" is used is in relation to the judgment of God because of sin (Ex. 16:20).

Of the afflictions mentioned it is interesting that there is no mention of the crown of thorns, the lashing, or the pierced side. This is in part because the Psalm is focused upon the sufferings of the Lord on the cross, not those indignities he endured before hand. The pierced side is not mentioned because the Lord was already dead and the Psalmist is musing on the conscious sufferings the Lord endured.

Many years ago I had the nerve of a tooth drilled out without anesthetic. It was agony, but only for a few brief seconds. It was an experience I would never want again, how could I describe what it felt like? All words,

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clauses, descriptive terms would fail then I understand the perplexity of the Psalmist as he tried to convey prophetically how the Lord felt in His experiences.

As I think on this, several hymns come to mind:

Was it for me, for me alone, the Saviour left His glorious Throne
The dazzling splendours of the sky, Was it for me, he came to die?
It was for me, yes all for me, O Love of God, so great so free
O wondrous love, I'll shout and sing
He died for me, My Lord and King.

It is a thing most wonderful, almost too wonderful to be,
That God's own Son should come from heaven, and die to save a child like me.

And yet I know that it is true: He chose a poor and humble lot
He wept, He toiled, He mourned, He died, for love of those who loved Him not.

I sometimes think about the cross, and shut my eyes, and try to see
The cruel nails and crown of thorns and Jesus crucified for me.

But even could I see Him die, I could but see a little part
Of that great love, which, like a fire, is always burning in His heart.

And yet I want to love thee, Lord; O light the flame within my heart,
And I will love Thee more and more, until I see Thee as thou art.

Words: William Walsham How (1823-1897), 1872

. . . . Rowan Jennings