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## ***Christ's Incredible Cross***

By David Servant

### **THREE** **The Cross Predicted**

The Gospel writer Luke reports that soon after Jesus' resurrection, He appeared incognito to two disciples traveling to the village of Emmaus. These two men had been discussing the perplexing events that had transpired over the past few days—how Jesus had been crucified and how some women were now reporting that His tomb was empty. Bewildered by it all, they confessed their confusion to the Man who appeared to be a stranger.

Luke recorded Jesus' enlightening response to their puzzlement:

“O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:25-27).

What a Bible study that must have been!

Jesus pointed out the references to Himself in the writings of Moses (the first five books of the Old Testament) and in all the books of the prophets, probably including the Psalms.<sup>1</sup>

Notice Jesus expected those two disciples to understand the necessity of His death because of what was written by the prophets. Those two disciples, and others later, finally realized from Jesus' explanation that the prophets wrote of His sufferings.

About two months later, the apostle Peter proclaimed during his second sermon, “But the things which God announced beforehand *by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He has thus fulfilled*” (Acts 3:18, emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although the Psalms are normally categorized apart from the Prophets, we know without a doubt that David, who authored half of the Psalms, was a prophet (see Acts 2:30). Also, Jesus later said to His apostles, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44, emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> See also Paul's statement in Acts 26:22-23 and Peter's in 1 Pet. 1:11.

Of the specific Old Testament prophecies dealing with the life and earthly ministry of Christ, the majority speak of His suffering on the cross and the events immediately preceding.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, there are specific prophecies that speak of His birth, life, and ministry, but those telling of His passion are far more numerous.

Why were Christ's sufferings highlighted in the Old Testament predictions? Because His death on the cross is the most significant aspect of His work. For the generations who would read the prophets before and after Christ's crucifixion, it was not primarily His birth, childhood, miracles, or teachings that the Holy Spirit desired to spotlight, but the crucifixion itself.

Jesus would one day die for the sins of the world, and God prepared for that event through the many predictions of His prophets. Not only was the cross an event preordained before the foundation of the world and prefigured by hundreds of thousands of animal sacrifices, it was also predicted for centuries before it happened.

It is beyond the scope of this book to examine every messianic prophecy in the Old Testament. Because we are concentrating on Christ's cross, we will focus on only a few messianic predictions that foretold His sufferings.

### **Christ's Suffering Predicted in the Psalms**

From the cross, Jesus personally directed us to the twenty-second Psalm by quoting its first verse, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46b). Following this "cry of dereliction" (as it is called) the Psalmist describes his persecutors and his predicament, all foretelling Jesus' agony on the cross:

But I am a worm, and not a man, a reproach of men, and despised by the people. All who see me sneer at me; they separate with the lip, they wag the head, saying, "Commit yourself to the Lord; let Him deliver him; let Him rescue him, because He delights in him" (Ps. 22:6-8).

Matthew wrote that this verse was fulfilled as Jesus was mocked on the cross by His onlookers (see Matt. 27:43).

The Psalmist continued:

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws; and Thou dost lay me in the dust of death. For dogs have surrounded me; a band of evildoers has encompassed me; *they pierced my hands and my feet*. I can count all my bones. They look, they stare at me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots<sup>4</sup> (Ps. 22:14-18, emphasis added).

Notice that not only does the persecuted Psalmist, and thus Christ, cry out that God has forsaken him (v. 1), but he also credits God as the One who "dost lay me in the dust of death" (v. 15).

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<sup>3</sup>For proof, I refer the reader to *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, by Josh McDowell, pp. 181-183. There McDowell categorizes a list of 232 specific predictions concerning Christ, the largest category containing those predictions which revolve around His passion (the sufferings of Christ in the period following the Last Supper and including the Crucifixion).

<sup>4</sup>This was fulfilled as recorded in Matt. 27:35.

As we have already learned from Peter's Pentecost sermon, there was more to Christ's crucifixion than met the eyes of those who witnessed it. Jesus was nailed to the cross by "the hands of godless men," yet He was "delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). He was taking our place and suffering the wrath of God for our sins, fulfilling God's preordained plan.

Almost three hundred years ago, Matthew Henry wrote concerning this passage in Psalm 22:

The sentence of death passed upon Adam was thus expressed: *Unto dust thou shalt return*. And therefore Christ, in his obedience to death, here uses a similar expression: *Thou hast brought me to the dust of the earth*.<sup>5</sup>

Psalm 69 is unarguably another messianic psalm<sup>6</sup> authored by David in a time of distress. In verses 20-21 we read:

Reproach has broken my heart, and I am so sick. And I looked for sympathy, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none. They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.

This passage was fulfilled when, on the cross, the bystanders offered Jesus "wine to drink mingled with gall" and later gave Him sour wine, as recorded in Matthew 27:34 and 48.

A few verses later, David (and thus Christ) says:

For they have persecuted him *whom Thou Thyself hast smitten*, and they tell of the pain of those whom *Thou hast wounded* (Ps. 69:26, emphasis added).

Once more we see the intent of the cross from God's perspective. Jesus was not only smitten by men but "smitten *of God* and afflicted" (Is. 53:4b, emphasis added). He suffered God's wrath on our behalf.

Although Psalm 88 is not specifically quoted anywhere in the New Testament, which would officially validate it as a messianic Psalm, I (along with others) have always considered it a description of Jesus' anguish on the cross. Some think that Jesus may have been quoting verse 3 of this Psalm, "For my soul has had enough troubles" when He said concerning His imminent crucifixion, "Now My soul has become troubled", recorded in John 12:27. Regardless, this psalm is certainly the most melancholy of all the Psalms. For example, we read,

I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit; I have become like a man without strength, forsaken among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom Thou dost remember no more, and they are cut off from Thy hand. Thou hast put me in the lowest pit, in dark places, in the depths. *Thy wrath has rested upon me, and Thou hast afflicted me with all Thy waves*. Thou hast removed my acquaintances far from me; Thou hast made me an object of loathing to them; I am shut up and cannot go out....I was afflicted and about to die from my youth on; I suffer Thy terrors; I am overcome. *Thy burning anger has passed over me;*

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Henry, The Matthew Henry Commentary, p. 599.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 69:9, for example, is quoted in John 2:17 as being fulfilled by Jesus' cleansing of the temple, and Psalm 69:4 is quoted in John 15:25, as being fulfilled by Jesus who "was hated without a cause."

*Thy terrors have destroyed me. They have surrounded me like water all day long; they have encompassed me altogether* (Ps. 88:4-8, 15-17, emphasis added).

It certainly doesn't seem unreasonable to think that this Psalm prophetically speaks of the terrors Christ experienced on the cross for our sakes.

### **Isaiah's Foretelling**

More than any other chapter in the Old Testament, the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah describes the significance of Jesus' work on the cross. Jesus Himself quoted from it just before His arrest and trial, and portions of it are quoted at least four other times in the New Testament.<sup>7</sup>

Just as surely as the third chapter of Romans could be considered the central chapter (from a theological perspective) of the New Testament, the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah can be considered the central chapter of the Old Testament. It is well worth quoting the entire chapter, which I will do, adding commentary as we proceed.

Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For He [Jesus] grew up before Him [God the Father] like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him (Is. 53:1-3).

Jesus was despised and forsaken to a certain degree during His entire life, but there was no time when He was virtually universally despised and forsaken other than during His trial and crucifixion.

Surely our griefs [literally "sicknesses"] He Himself bore, and our sorrows [literally "pains"] He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted (Is. 53:4).

Once again we read of God's intent from the beginning being fulfilled on the cross. Jesus suffered not only the hatred of men but also the wrath of God. Isaiah further elaborated on this theme as no other Old Testament writer:

But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being [literally "peace"] fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him (Is. 53:5-6).

That is precisely what occurred on the cross. Jesus bore our sins—our guilt was transferred to Him, and He became liable for our penalty.

Continuing, Isaiah spoke of Jesus' trials, during which He remained silent before His accusers:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Matt. 8:17; Luke 22:37; Acts 8:32; 1 Pet. 2:22, 24.

<sup>8</sup> See Matt. 26:63; 27:12-14 for the fulfillment.

He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth. By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? (Is. 53:7-8).

I encourage you to re-read that last sentence. Isaiah was saying that no one of Jesus' generation, as they watched Him die, had any idea He was suffering death because He was taking the punishment due them.

His grave was assigned with wicked men [the two thieves who were crucified with Him], yet He was with a rich man in His death [Jesus was buried in a rich man's tomb; see Matt. 27:57-60]; because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth (Is. 53:9).

Jesus was sinless.

But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand (Is. 53:10).

This verse again teaches God's purpose in Christ's death. As we studied in the previous chapter, the Levitical sacrifices typified Jesus' sacrifice, and here Isaiah stated that Jesus became a guilt offering.

This passage also indicates that the One who would be "cut off out of the land of the living" would obviously live again, and He would "see His offspring" (those of us who would believe in Him) and would "prolong His days."

As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities (Is. 53:11).

There is the gospel of Jesus Christ in a nutshell. We are justified because He bore our iniquities.

Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors (Is. 53:12).

Some commentators see Isaiah's statement that the Messiah would "be numbered with the transgressors" as a reference to Jesus' dying with the two thieves.<sup>9</sup> The statement that He would "intercede for the transgressors" is often considered a reference to His intercession for the thief who requested mercy or possibly His prayer for God to forgive the Roman soldiers who divided His garments.

These, no doubt, are correct interpretations, but those statements have an even better application to what Jesus did for all of us. He took upon Himself *our* sin, and thus was identified with "the transgressors." *We're all transgressors*. And Jesus "always lives to

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<sup>9</sup> A questionable verse found in Mark 15:28 supports this view.

make intercession” for us as the author of Hebrews wrote (Heb. 7:25). Jesus is everyone’s Intercessor, the “go-between” between man and God.

Now allow me to end this chapter as I began it. Of all the specific predictions found in the Old Testament concerning Christ’s birth, life, and earthly ministry, the bulk of them deal with His crucifixion.

*Jesus fulfilled more specific Old Testament messianic predictions concerning His life and ministry during His final day on earth than He did during all the rest of His earthly life.* Should we not then view Christ’s death on the cross just as the Holy Spirit did and does, as the most significant aspect of His earthly ministry? Certainly we should.