

## Psalm 22:1-21 The Suffering Saviour

### Introduction

Aishtan Shakarian is a seventy-five year old woman who lives in the small village of Ksani, sixty kilometres from the Georgian capital Tbilisi. To earn a meagre income she scavenges for scrap metal with her shovel. On this particular day, 28 March 2011, she was thrusting her spade into the ground and located a fibre-optic backbone cable. Expecting there to be some copper inside the casing she decided to cut off a length of the cable to strip out the copper. However, this was no ordinary cable. It was an international cable that connected the southern Caucasus to Europe. Very quickly the vibrations on the cable were recorded at a control room in Tbilisi and police were dispatched to arrest the person who was interfering with the cable. This was a not infrequent occurrence in Georgia. She was arrested on the spot and admitted her offence. However, given her age and deep poverty, she would have difficulty paying the fine imposed for this offence; the courts would be reluctant to impose the alternative sentence of a year in prison and even some time working in community service might pose serious problems for her. This elderly lady thought her actions would not affect other people, nobody would notice! For twelve hours she took the whole of Armenia off the internet, together with a lesser time for many people in Georgia and caused service interruptions in Azerbaijan [*The Wall Street Journal*, Fri-Sun, 8-10 April 2011]. ‘No-one is an island, entire of itself...any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee’ [John Donne, poet 1572-1631]. In our Western culture over the last few centuries we have focussed too much on the individual and their rights at the expense of our responsibilities to other people in our families and the wider community. We may never do what Aishtan Shakarian did, but the mindset that I can do what I like it won’t affect other people is deeply engrained in us all and takes a conscious decision to live in God-honouring way that causes us to think of needs of other people as well as our own.

No-one more than Jesus exemplified the way we ought to live. In John 10 He is described as *the good shepherd* because He *lays down His life for the sheep*. In Hebrews 13:20 He is described as *the great shepherd of the sheep... brought back from the dead...in order to equip you with everything good for doing His [Father’s]will*. In I Peter 5:4 Jesus is described as *the Chief Shepherd* who is coming again to reward and honour those of His flock who have served Him faithfully during their earthly lives. Peter wrote: *And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away*. This progression from the suffering servant of God, to the resurrected Lord and then the coming king is also seen in the Old Testament in Psalms 22 to 24. Psalm 22 is the Psalm of the dying shepherd revealing the words on which Jesus meditated on the cross prior to His death and the familiar words by which He cried out from the cross to God. Psalm 23 is the Psalm of the living, resurrected shepherd who guides His people throughout their lives on earth and then invites us to share His eternal presence, life in all its fullness beyond the grave. Psalm 24 is the Psalm of the coming triumphant King of Glory welcomed by His subjects when He comes to reign in glory.

Unlike most other Psalms which are based on the experiences of the writers this one is outside the experience of not only David, its author, but that of any other human being than Jesus Himself. David wrote these Psalms approximately 1000 years before Jesus’ birth at Bethlehem. It was not a lucky guess or great poetic imagination, but divine inspiration that led to the composition of these lines. Peter, at the start of the Christian Church, on the Day of Pentecost, said this of the author of this Psalm: *29Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried and his tomb is here to this day. 30 But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. 31*

Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was not abandoned to the grave, nor did His body see decay (Acts 2: 29-31). Peter for the rest of his days was amazed that God could give in such detail a series of events in Jesus' life so far ahead of time. (I Peter 1:10-11: *Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, <sup>11</sup> trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when He **predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.*** It is appropriate for you and me to ask what should my response be to the God who has gone to such lengths in providing salvation for me, through the sacrifice of His one and only son on the cross, 2,000 years ago?

## **1. The New Testament connection to Psalm 22**

### **A The three hours of light (9am-12 noon)**

On the day that Jesus died, He had been the victim of a series of show trials before Pilate and Herod, following the equally dubious legal process by which charges were brought against Him by Caiaphas and the other leading religious officials in the Jewish faith in Jerusalem. However, as early as nine o'clock He, together with two convicted bandits, was visible outside the city walls of Jerusalem hanging on three crosses. It is instructive to ask who or what was Jesus thinking about during that awful day? All the indicators we have in the biblical text show, remarkably, that between nine and twelve noon He was thinking about the needs of other people, rather than His own. For whom did He express His concern?

(a) **The Women of Jerusalem** (Luke 23:27-31) <sup>27</sup> *A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him.* <sup>28</sup> *Jesus turned and said to them, Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.* <sup>29</sup> *For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!'* <sup>30</sup> *Then 'they will say to the mountains, Fall on us! and to the hills Cover us!'* <sup>31</sup> *For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?* This is not the first time Jesus envisaged the slaughter of the Jewish-Roman war of 66-70AD when horrific things took place in Jerusalem. In Luke 19:41-44 we have the record of Jesus' grief re the people of that city—in this case on the previous Sunday, Palm Sunday. *As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it <sup>42</sup> and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. <sup>43</sup> The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. <sup>44</sup> They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."* The compassion of Jesus was so evident to all kinds of people in the Gospels. It is a model for us in our love for people as well.

(b) **The Soldiers who put Him on the cross** (Luke 23:34) *Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.* His concerns were also directed towards specific people who interacted with Him, in this case the soldiers who physically put Him on the cross. Instead of the usual curses and abuse it was incredible love and compassion to men who were just 'doing their job', a brutal and violent one.

(c) **The Criminal on the cross next to Him** (Luke 23:39-43) <sup>39</sup> *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!* <sup>40</sup> *But the other criminal rebuked him. Don't you fear God, he said, since you are under the same sentence?* <sup>41</sup> *We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.* <sup>42</sup> *Then he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* <sup>43</sup> *Jesus answered him, I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise.* Here was a man from Barabbas' gang of violent criminals who deserved his punishment. This was a justified execution along with his colleague on the other side of Jesus. Neither of these men deserved any sympathy. One man continued a bitter and twisted man to the end, but the other, seeing a glimpse of who Jesus is, begged for forgiveness and mercy. Jesus forgave his sins and assured the man that salvation

is a free gift of grace, available to all, the moment we reach out by faith and receive it. Have you accepted this gift from Jesus?

(d) **His mother Mary** (John 19:25-27) *Near the cross of Jesus stood His mother, His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. <sup>26</sup> When Jesus saw His mother there, and the disciple whom He loved standing near by, He said to His mother, Dear woman, here is your son, <sup>27</sup> and to the disciple, Here is your mother. From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.* Another person for whom He showed great love was His mother Mary. He entrusted her to the care of His closest disciple, and her nephew, John. What a tragedy today when people who have no excuse fail to love and maintain a relationship with their elderly parents, yet Jesus in a time of extreme pain and anguish wanted to ensure that His mother was taken care of.

### **B The three hours of darkness** (12 noon to 3pm)

Yet for the last three hours when His sufferings were at their most intense as our substitute and sin bearer God the Father covered that place in thick darkness when it ought to have been bright daylight. Yet the agonies of the Son of God were hidden from view at that time. The Gospels record His words and indicate a glimpse into some of His thoughts at that time which are closely linked to Psalm 22, the Psalm on which He was meditating, at least for part of those hours. This is most apparent in:

(a) **The Cry of Agony** (Mark 15:34) *And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?— which means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* These are the opening words of Psalm 22; and in this passage it describes the agonies of crucifixion, a form of execution not invented for 500 years after this Psalm was composed.

(b) **The Cry of Thirst** (John 19:28) <sup>28</sup> *Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, I am thirsty. <sup>29</sup> A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips.* Another Psalm which follows the same pattern as Psalm 22 is Psalm 69. The first part of the Psalm describes suffering (Psalm 69:1-29), followed by victory and triumph (Psalm 69: 30-36). It is the source of the Scripture to which Jesus referred when He cried out *I am thirsty*. Psalm 69:21 states: *They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.* Gall served as a kind of anaesthetic to dull pain and was often given to people hanging on crosses. The wine vinegar was close to the standard drink of the day that ordinary people had with their meals. From our modern perspective it is not a drink of choice, but it was what was available for Jesus at the time

(c) **The Cry of Victory** (John 19:30) *When He had received the drink, Jesus said, **It is finished.** With that, He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.* What is most significant is that the last public declaration from Jesus, *It is finished* (tetelestai) is from the last verse of Psalm 22 where our English versions usually translate it *He (God) has done it*, but as there is no object for the verb in the original Hebrew it can equally be translated *It is finished*. In this message I want to briefly touch on the first part of Psalm 22 that covers the Messiah's grief.

## **2. The Messiah's Grief** (Psalm 22:1-21)

There is an alternating pattern in this section of the suffering of Jesus alternately described next to statement of confidence in God, or prayer to God. We are treading on holy ground here and can make but the briefest of comments on the intense agonies of the Son of God dying for us on Calvary, but it serves as a reminder to us when we go through the dark days of ill-health, bereavement, the loss of employment or breakdown of relationships or whatever difficult times you have faced or are facing, that the One who takes our prayers to the Father understands the difficulties we are going through. He knows what it is to suffer unspeakable agonies; He understands the sense of utter weakness when our bodies are no longer under our own control. Yet at another level His most painful trial was the separation from His Father,

with whom He had enjoyed perfect communion throughout eternity past. The agony of complete loneliness for the first time in His life was the cause of His cry, uttering the opening words of Psalm 22.

(a) **The Cry** (22:1-2)

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?*<sup>2</sup> *My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.* The silence of God in our dark days and trials has troubled many a believer down the centuries. Jesus has been there on the cross. It was not that Jesus simply felt forsaken, He was deliberately forsaken by the Father, because He was hanging there in our place, taking the punishment we deserve for our sins. God the Father had never loved Him more than when He was on the cross, but treated Him as if He was the sinner, punishing Him in our place. We could never be good enough to atone for our sin. Jesus willingly went to the cross out of love for His people in each generation who by grace would receive the gift of salvation purchased by His sacrifice. ‘There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin. He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in’ –wrote hymn-writer C F Alexander (CMP674 There is a green hill far away). The details of the separation within the Trinity we will never know nor understand. What does matter is this: have you received the gift of salvation provided by Jesus’ death on the cross. That is your responsibility and mine –we will have no excuse when we stand before God on judgement day if we have not accepted this gift purchased for us in Jesus.

(b) **The Plea** (22:3-5)

<sup>3</sup> *Yet You are enthroned as the Holy One; You are the one Israel praises.*<sup>4</sup> *In You our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and You delivered them.* <sup>5</sup> *To You they cried out and were saved; in You they trusted and were not put to shame.* In the midst of His very real agonies Jesus pleads the biblical promises of past deliverances and answered prayers for the people of God. If You have been faithful in the past (assumed), then please help me in the present. This is a principle so applicable to us when we are discouraged and low. God does not change. If in the midst of his tears, as he sat in the ruins of Jerusalem, Jeremiah could be assured of the faithfulness of God so can we in our difficulties today. Lamentations 3:22-24 declares: <sup>22</sup>*Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail.* <sup>23</sup>*They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.* <sup>24</sup> *I say to myself, The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for Him.*

(c) **The Adversaries** (22:6-8)

<sup>6</sup> *But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people.*<sup>7</sup> *All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.* <sup>8</sup> *“He trusts in the Lord,” they say, “let the Lord rescue him. Let Him deliver him, since he delights in Him.”* Matthew 27:39-44 recorded: <sup>39</sup> *Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads* <sup>40</sup> *and saying, You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!* <sup>41</sup> *In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him.* <sup>42</sup> *He saved others, they said, but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.* <sup>43</sup> *He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'* <sup>44</sup> *In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.* The hatred of the man of peace who declined to support violence as a means of overthrowing the Roman occupation knew no limits. Jesus knew that the forthcoming revolt would end in total disaster for the nation, but His foolish mockers could not grasp this truth. Little has changed in our world meekness and humility is mocked and despised as weakness and folly. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in India, in January 1948, by a group of militant Hindus opposed to his plans for peaceful relations between the religious and ethnic peoples of India is a current reminder that little has changed in our world. There is a price to pay to standing up for truth and maintaining your integrity. In a small proportion of these cases it can cost people their lives. However, the difference is that Jesus

voluntarily laid down His life for us. His enemies were totally responsible for their actions, but God brought the greatest possible good out of this situation.

**(d) The Testimony (22:9-11)**

<sup>9</sup> *Yet You brought me out of the womb; You made me trust in you, even at My mother's breast.*  
<sup>10</sup> *From birth I was cast on You; from My mother's womb You have been My God.* <sup>11</sup> *Do not be far from Me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.* In the second section of this Psalm (22:3-5) there was a recalling of God's faithfulness to His people in the past, by implication an assurance that He will assist us in the present time of need. Here the progression in thought leads to personal testimony: *You have been My God* (22:10). Can you say the same? Has there been a time in your life when you have trusted Jesus as Lord and Saviour? Each of us needs to take this step. It leads to encouragement to seek God's help once more in the present time of trial.

**(e) The Adversaries (22:12-13)**

<sup>12</sup> *Many bulls surround Me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle Me.* <sup>13</sup> *Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against Me.* Poetic images of the people in power against whom no-one can resist (in human terms) getting their way. How many countries in the world at the present time are ordinary people suffering unjustly at the hands of oppressive rulers? Gaddafi's brutal suppression of his people in the city of Misurata is the most prominent story in the news, but numerous other examples could be given. In most cases there are no NATO planes and missiles to assist the victims. Is their case (sometimes yours or mine) hopeless? No! In the short term evil people may appear to triumph. On many occasions the innocent are dead and buried before justice is seen to be done. However, if not righted in this life it will be by God beyond this life. Evil will never ultimately triumph. It will never have the final word.

**(f) The Suffering (22:14-18)**

<sup>14</sup> *I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me.* <sup>15</sup> *My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.* <sup>16</sup> *Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet.* <sup>17</sup> *All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me.* <sup>18</sup> *They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.* This is a graphic description of crucifixion in which the bones of the hands, arms shoulders and pelvis are out of joint (22:14); there is excessive perspiration due to the intense suffering (22:14); the heart is working overtime, strength rapidly exhausted, together with extreme thirst (22:14-15); His feet and hands were pierced with the hungry wild dogs that lived in and around many urban communities of the Roman world hoping to get some flesh to eat from the dying men on the crosses (22:16); the victims could see their bones because they were stripped naked as part of the humiliating punishment of this form of execution (22:17); to add insult to injury the soldiers threw dice to decide who got the victim's clothes because 'he wouldn't need them again' (22:18 –see Mark 15:24 for its fulfilment). Crucifixion we need to remember had not been invented at the time David wrote this Psalm. It was also a Roman not a Jewish form of execution. The Roman authorities were both unfamiliar with and disinterested in this prophecy. One thousand years earlier God had inspired David to write this description of Jesus' death. Does this not make you stop and think about the God who has called you to follow Him? Does it not compel you to respond to the love of the One who died there in your place and mine? No wonder Charles Wesley penned these famous words:  
'And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood.  
Died He for me who caused His pain? For me, who Him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! how can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me.' [C.M.P.33 v1]

**(g) The Climax (22:19-21)**

<sup>19</sup> *But you, Lord, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me.* <sup>20</sup> *Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs.* <sup>21</sup> *Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;*

*save me from the horns of the wild oxen.* Did God abandon His beloved Son for ever? No it must have felt like an eternity to Jesus, but it was ‘only’ for a few hours. These verses are the hinge that take the bleak and utter darkness of the earlier part of the Psalm and point to the triumph and confidence in God of the latter part of the Psalm. Verse 19 is an acknowledgement once again that God the Father can grant Him the strength to complete the remaining part of this ordeal. His sense of communion with the Father is being restored. This reminds us that many genuine believers living a life pleasing to God can have times in their lives when they experience the silence of God or a sense of His absence. In the mystery of His will we may never understand why, but in such times we need to plead for strength to remain faithful to God and come through our trials. Verses 20-21 indicate an awareness of the imminent end of this time of trial, though that may not readily be apparent from the NIV text of v21. A better translation of v21 is: *Rescue me from the mouths of lions, from the horns of the wild oxen.* ***You have heard Me!*** ‘This single (Hebrew) word is a cry that greets a last minute deliverance’ (D. Kidner, *Psalms*, Vol.1, p. 108). Assuming the truth of this insight it points to the moment when Jesus in His spirit knew that His atoning sacrifice in the place of sinners had accomplished the goal of our redemption and reconciliation with God. Hallelujah! Have you benefited from Jesus sacrifice by accepting Him as your Lord and Saviour? Or do you need today to put your faith and trust in Him? I hope each one of us can sing with a full assurance: ‘Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature’s night;  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray –I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free. I rose, went forth and followed Thee.’ (C.M.P.33 v4)  
Amen.