

Christ in the Psalms

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by Ben Purves

Jesus taught his disciples, "Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." These are the words of Jesus to his disciples in the Upper Room after the resurrection.

Have you ever read through the Psalms while looking for Christ? As Jesus taught his disciples, the Psalms contain much about him.

We should read and study the entirety of the Old Testament with an eagerness to see what was written about Jesus. But in today's blog post I'm focusing attention on the Psalms, and I invite you to wade into the Psalms with me so that you might become acquainted with what was written about Jesus in ages past.

This is not an exhaustive study, but rather an opening salvo. Below are some texts from Psalms immediately followed by where they are used in the New Testament.

1. Psalm 2:1-2

"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed."

Here we see Jesus as he is opposed and conspired against. In Acts 4:25-26, the persecuted church appealed to the sovereignty of God for courage while quoting this text in describing the conspiracy of Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and the peoples of Israel against Jesus.

2. Psalm 2:7

"I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you.'"

Here we see our risen Lord. In the apostle Paul's synagogue sermon in Pisidian Antioch, he quoted Psalm 2:7 as a fulfilled prophecy of Christ's resurrection. "We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, that he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'" (Acts 13:33).

The author of Hebrews also quotes Psalm 2:7 in Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5 to speak of Jesus as the Son of God who has been appointed by the Father as our exalted high priest.

3. Psalm 2:8-9

"Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

Here we see Jesus' authority over all of the nations and his triumph over enemies. Jesus alludes to this psalm in Revelation 2:26-27 in his letter to the church of Thyatira. This also reappears in Revelation 12:5 and 19:15 to describe Jesus' authority, rule, and defeat of the nations.

4. Psalm 6:3a

"My soul also is greatly troubled."

In Psalm 6 David prays for deliverance as he shares his grief and contemplates death. I believe Jesus alludes to this psalm in John 12:27 as he considers his coming death and the hour of his suffering. This is Palm Sunday in John 12 as Jesus has entered Jerusalem on the first day of the Passion Week and is announcing that "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12:23). He then instructs his disciples and the crowds about his coming death. "My soul also is greatly troubled" is practically a direct quote from Psalm 6 in the Septuagint (The Greek translation of the Old Testament).

5. Psalm 8:2

"Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger."

This psalm appears on the first day of the Passion Week (Matthew 21:7-16). Jesus has entered Jerusalem to shouts of "Hosanna" and he then proceeded to the Temple and cleansed it — chasing out all who were buying and selling, overturning the tables of the money-changers. He then heals the blind and the lame, and the children in the Temple observe this and respond with shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David!" The chief priests and scribes are angry about the praise Jesus is receiving, saying "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus then cites this psalm in Matthew 21:16 as he confronts them. "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise'?"

6. Psalm 8:4-6

"What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet."

The author of Hebrews also quotes this psalm in describing Jesus' incarnation in Hebrews 2:6-8. Jesus is the second Adam, and the Father has put all things in subjection to him. He was for a little while made lower than the angels so that he might suffer and die, but now he has been exalted above the angels and crowned with glory and honor.

7. Psalm 8:6

"You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet."

Psalm 8 is quoted many times in the New Testament, but this time by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:27 and Ephesians 1:22. Here we see Jesus enthroned by the Father, all things placed are under his feet, with Jesus exalted as head over the church.

8. Psalm 16:8-11

"I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

Peter teaches us that this Davidic psalm is a prophecy of the resurrection of Christ. The Messiah will never see corruption, but he would rise from the dead. Peter quotes this Psalm in His first sermon on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:22-33.

Here Peter speaks about David's prophetic insight in his psalm writing: "Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon the throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption" (Acts 2:30-31).

9. Psalm 16:10

For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.

Again this psalm is quoted in reference to Christ's resurrection, but this time by the apostle Paul in Acts 13:35.

10. Psalm 18:49

For this I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations, and sing to your name.

This psalm is cited by Paul toward the end of Romans as he describes Christ. He is the one who fulfilled the prophecies of God in his servanthood. And it is through his finished work that God extends mercy and salvation to the Gentiles so that they might glorify him.

"For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name" (Romans 15:8-9).

11. Psalm 22:1

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Verse 1 of this psalm is quoted by Jesus as he cries out upon the cross. For those at the crucifixion who knew the Psalms, and for us as we read the Gospels, this directs us back to Psalm 22. See Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34. At this point, it's almost impossible to parse out the prophecies contained in Psalm 22 without bringing in the entire crucifixion narrative from each Gospel.

Below are only a few mentions from the psalm and the detail is specific and intense:

v. 16 — Jesus' hands and feet are pierced as he is crucified (Matthew 27:35a).

v. 18 — Roman soldiers cast lots for Jesus' clothing (Matthew 27:35b).

v. 7 — The crowds mock Him (Matthew 27:39; Mark 15:29; Luke 23:35).

v. 8 — The crowds sarcastically command Him to call for deliverance (Matthew 27:43).

v. 15 — He is thirsty (John 19:28).

There is so much more to Psalm 22, and if you keep reading a marvelous shift takes place. It does not conclude with the sufferings of Christ, but closes with the ends of the earth coming to worship. It is the sufferings of Christ that bring the ends of the earth to God.

Do you see Jesus in the Psalms?

As I have done here, let me encourage you to take the time to trace Old Testament citations through the New Testament. It can be quite the undertaking, but it is very rewarding. And as we use Scripture to interpret Scripture, we often find our vision clarified.

Please note that this brief survey of Christ in the Psalms is quite incomplete. We have waded in up to our ankles, yet it feels like we've gone in deep. Already we have seen Christ's incarnation, sufferings, resurrection, and glimpses of his exaltation, triumph, and eternal reign. And we are only up to Psalm 22. I invite you to keep reading and looking for Jesus. Go in deep, all the way to Psalm 150. There is so much more of Jesus to see!

As we spend our summer in the Psalms, it is my prayer that you will read and meditate upon them, enjoy them, and look for Christ.

Pastor Ben