

David The Prophet

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Hebrews 11, popularly called "the Faith Chapter," contains the recitation of the names and deeds of several men and women of faith from creation to the time of Israel's entering of the Promised Land. In it, the author—most likely the apostle Paul—presents illustrations from the Old Testament to bear out his opening statement: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony" (Hebrews 11:1-2).

In the lives of individual after individual, he shows that their expressions of faith in God, despite the lack of material evidence, proved they were righteous (verse 4), pleased God (verse 5), and were heirs of righteousness (verse 7). The remarkable acts that they accomplished—from Abel's offering of an excellent sacrifice to Rahab's hiding of the Israelite spies—were done because, believing the Word of God, they envisioned a heavenly future that others could not see.

We see, then, that the heroes of faith not only lived righteous lives in the present, but also moved and acted with a steady eye on the future. Their faith had its foundation in the invisible God whose Word they obeyed, yet their foreknowledge of God's plan for mankind contained in the promises that God gave to them and to Israel also played a major role, one not nearly recognized enough among professing Christians. It was not just the promise of salvation or even of eternal life dangled before them that made them so unflinchingly faithful. It was also their steadfast hope of a better tomorrow in God's Kingdom.

David Among the Prophets

Later in the chapter, Paul writes: "And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets . . ." (verse 32). After briefly sketching the faith of Rahab at Jericho, he realizes that he cannot tell the tale of every faithful individual from the Old Testament, so he begins merely to name them in roughly chronological order. He quickly lists four judges, then lumps David, Samuel, and the prophets in another group before recounting their and others' exploits for God.

We know David primarily as a warrior and king. We realize that he was also "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (II Samuel 23:1). Less often do we, as Paul does here, rank him among the prophets, as does Peter in his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:29-31. However, Paul's grouping of David with Samuel—who was a prophet and a judge—and the rest of a larger group of Old Testament prophets should be no surprise; for beyond his historical exploits and the lessons we can learn from his full and complex life, his most lasting contribution may well be the numerous prophecies that he wrote down for our learning (Romans 15:4).

It is intriguing to note that Paul chose to place David at the head of this second group of names, out of chronological order and ahead of Samuel. Was this purposeful or just his stream of consciousness? If purposeful, it may indicate that Paul considered David the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, or at least eminent enough to head the list.

Whatever Paul's reason, the fact that David appears with Samuel and the prophets, as well as his inclusion in this Faith Chapter, argues that he conforms to the themes that Paul is expounding. He, too, lived a life of righteousness and faith in firm hope of receiving God's glorious promises in His future Kingdom. Though his conquests and reign established the Golden Age of Israelite history, he yearned for God's direct rule over, not just Israel, but the whole earth.

Because of his zeal for Him and His Kingdom, God used David mightily as a prophet to flesh out many of those promises in his writings, the Psalms. In his last words, David refers to the fact that God had inspired him: "The Spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue" (II Samuel 23:2). We should not understand this to mean that God inspired him only in his last words but that the Holy Spirit was behind his entire contribution to the Old Testament, which was primarily the compositions we know as "psalms."

Even so, his last words have struck commentators down through the ages as unmistakably prophetic and specifically Messianic in tone. Adam Clarke writes, "The words of this song contain a glorious prediction of Messiah's kingdom and conquests, in highly poetic language." Of II Samuel 23:1-7, the *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* states:

[The chapter contains] the prophetic will and testament of the great king, unfolding the importance of his rule in relation to the sacred history of the future. . . . [T]hese "last words" contain the divine seal of all that he has sung and prophesied in several psalms concerning the eternal dominion of his seed, on the strength of the divine promise which he received through the prophet Nathan, that his throne should be established for ever. . . . These words are not merely a lyrical expansion of that promise, but a prophetic declaration uttered by David at the close of his life and by divine inspiration, concerning the true King of the kingdom of God.

A substantial number of his psalms are clearly prophetic, even some of those that seem, on the surface, to describe his own feelings of despair and abandonment during the low periods of his life. With just a slight shift in perspective, they can often be seen as describing Christ's struggles to master His own human nature and trust in God for deliverance. In fact, if we bring a prophetic eye to the reading of many of David's psalms, we can perceive their predictive nature.

The Messiah's Suffering

Perhaps the easiest way to see this is to survey one of his most clearly prophetic psalms, Psalm 22. Anyone familiar with the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus Christ can see the obvious parallels, and the writers of the gospel accounts—especially Matthew—bring them out through direct quotations of this psalm. Henry Halley, author of *Halley's Bible Handbook*, writes of this psalm, "[T]hough written a thousand years before Jesus, it is so vivid a description of the crucifixion of Jesus that one would think of the writer as being personally present at the Cross" (p. 254).

No one knows what event of David's life, if any, provides the background to his plaintive song, but it must have been the nadir of his sufferings, the most likely guess being sometime during Saul's pursuit of him. However, even if it is based on David's experience of persecution, Psalm 22 is so specific and detailed in its descriptions of Christ's crucifixion that it can in reality only be a divinely inspired prophecy of the execution of the Son of God—a full millennium before the events took place in Roman Jerusalem.

At least nine prophetic references in Psalm 22 tie directly to the suffering of Jesus Christ. Without numbering them, the following summarizes the amazingly accurate details of Christ's last hours:

The psalm begins with perhaps the most heart-rending cry in history: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Psalm 22:1). As Matthew and Mark attest, Jesus Himself spoke these words as He was about to die: "And about the ninth hour [mid-afternoon] Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, '*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*' that is, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?' (Matthew 27:46; see also Mark 15:34).

Our Savior's cry of abandonment marks His awareness that His Father had indeed turned from Him, being burdened and defiled by all human sin (Isaiah 53:6; II Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 2:9). As Isaiah 59:2 informs us, "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear." Because He had never been sinful, Jesus had never known separation from the Father, and His feeling of desertion and rejection may have been the deepest cut of all.

The next significant allusion to Christ's suffering appears in Psalm 22:6-8:

But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised by the people. All those who see Me ridicule Me; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, "He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue Him; let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!"

David describes the Messiah's abusers and revilers in the mob that shouted for His death. As the prophet Isaiah later wrote: "He is despised and rejected by men, . . . He was despised, and we did not esteem Him" (Isaiah 53:3). Again, Matthew confirms the prophecy, recording the reaction of the crowd, who unwittingly used its very words:

And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads. . . . Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, . . . "He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, "I am the Son of God.'" Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing. (Matthew 27:39, 41, 43-44)

In its most accurate sense, Psalm 22:9-10 can refer only to Jesus: "But You are He who took Me out of the womb; You made Me trust while on My mother's breasts. I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother's womb You have been My God." While others were known and chosen for special works from the womb (for example, Jeremiah; see Jeremiah 1:5), only Jesus had a relationship with the Father from infancy.

Luke's account, particularly chapter 2, goes to great lengths to show Jesus' early relationship with God: "And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him" (Luke 2:40; see also verses 49, 51). His memory of God's help and presence from His earliest childhood only made His final suffering harder to bear: "Be not far from Me," He cries in Psalm 22:11, "for trouble is near; for there is none to help."

His Bruised and Beaten Body

In the next few verses appear descriptions of the state of His dying body. Verse 14 reads, "I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; it has melted within

Me." Descriptions of Roman crucifixion bear this out, and Christ's execution was no exception, apart from its brevity. Jesus was utterly exhausted, not just from lack of sleep, but also from the scourgings and beatings He had received (see Matthew 26:67; 27:26, 30; Luke 23:11). Having no strength to carry His cross, as was customary, another man, Simon of Cyrene, was compelled to do it for Him (Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26).

In addition, crucifixion often pulled its victims' bones out of joint, either from the jarring jolt of the stake plunging into its rocky posthole or from the full weight of the sagging body hanging from the cruelly driven nails in the hands and feet (or often in the wrists and ankles). That His heart was like melted wax, explains the *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary*, "recalls His burning anguish, the inflammation of the wounds, and the pressure of blood on the head and heart, the characteristic cause of death by crucifixion." Jesus, however, died, not of a broken or failed heart, but by exsanguination, that is, He bled to death, "as a lamb led to the slaughter . . . He poured out His soul unto death" (Isaiah 53:7, 12).

Psalms 22:15-16 predicts that the Messiah's tongue clings to His jaws in terrible thirst and that His hands and feet are pierced. Both of these details are dutifully documented in the gospels. John relates, "After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, 'I thirst!'" (John 19:28). Likewise, Luke 24:40 appears in a scene after His resurrection, when Jesus is trying to prove to His disciples that it is really He and no ghost: "When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet," which had obviously been pierced by nails. Thomas later asked to see and feel that same proof (John 20:25).

Even the minor detail from Psalm 22:17, "They look and stare at Me," finds a parallel in Matthew 27:36, where the apostle writes, "Sitting down, they kept watch over Him there." A last important feature regarding His crucifixion comes out in Psalm 22:18: "They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots." Matthew quotes this verse in Matthew 27:35, saying, "Then they crucified Him, and divided His garments, casting lots, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet."

The remainder of Psalm 22 looks even further into the future, foretelling the effects of Christ's magnificent sacrifice. Notice verses 27-29:

All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the Lord's and He rules over the nations. All the prosperous of the earth shall eat and worship; all those who go down to the dust shall bow before Him, even he who cannot keep himself alive.

In just three succinct verses, David encompasses the apostles spreading the good news around the world and its people eventually turning to worship the Messiah; the establishment of God's Kingdom at His return as King of kings; and the dead being resurrected to life to learn God's way and submit to Him.

The psalm's final verses seem to speak of the work of the church of God down through the ages in preaching the redeeming, atoning, and sanctifying work of Christ: "A posterity shall serve Him. It will be recounted of the Lord to the next generation, they will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He had done this" (Psalm 22:30-31). Under the inspiration of God's

Holy Spirit, David the prophet could see God's plan of salvation move forward from Christ's seemingly ignominious death to the efforts of His followers to preach His Word to as many as would hear it and beyond, all the way to its wonderful conclusion in eternity.

This vision of the glorious future reign of Christ and the conversion of mankind to His way of life constitutes a fixed vision throughout the psalms of David. When we read the Psalms, we should be aware of this prophetic perspective and allow the prophet David to inform and encourage us about the wonderful future God has in store for His chosen people.