

to talk about to anyone. This is understandable. However, we need poetry, psalms, and other writings to remind us of the reality of death, possibly because we do indeed find it so hard to talk about. I regret reading about Psalm 22 in Biblical commentaries because they play down the way it talks about death, and try to excuse the reader from considering death at all, when in reality, it can help us so much!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Take time to reflect on this passage and reflect upon your own experiences that may have been close to death. Let the Lord speak to you alone about what death means, and what it means to trust Jesus that He, and He alone can overcome death.
- Pray for those who know little about the Easter story, but will see some television programme or hear a radio broadcast about Easter, and begin to ask questions. Pray that the Lord will lead them to the right people to help answer their questions and enable them to understand the message of Easter.

Final Prayer

Help us, heavenly Father, to appreciate the message of salvation each and every day. We ask You to help us especially on days when we find it easy to forget it, or to be cynical, or conveniently leave it to one side. Heavenly Father, bless us by staying close to us, particularly at times of stress. AMEN

Prayer

We see the Cross at a distance, Holy and Almighty God; we can only look at it from afar because of our sin and weakness. We hold our heads in shame, Awesome and Everlasting Lord, for we deserve no favours from You, yet You have done all this for us. If we dare to look on the Cross, then change us forever, Lord God; for why should we ever be the same again? So be it, Almighty God: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Charity

Many charities struggle to bring love and peace to people who desperately need it. Pray that God's people will be alert to the evils of this world that must be fought through charity.

On-going prayers

- Pray against the darkness of evil that still haunts this world
- Give thanks for Jesus' love in sharing Himself with us
- Pray for people who fear for their jobs at the present time

Meditation

What a risk! My Saviour, You died for our liberty!
What a risk! My Lord, You died for our deliverance!
What a risk! My Redeemer, You paid the price for our sin!
You died for the ungodly so that sinners might be saved.
You died for the unrighteous, so that all might have peace.
You died for the weak, so that Your love might be proved.
You died to sin, so that we could live with You forever.
You died to self, so that we might find our unity in You.
You died to the world, so that all heaven might be richer.
What glory! My Jesus will be raised to the highest!
What glory! My Jesus will be crowned King of Kings!
What glory! My Jesus will be with the Father for ever!

Bible Study - Psalm 22:9-18

- ⁹ Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast.
- ¹⁰ From birth I was cast upon you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.
- ¹¹ Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near and there is no one to help.
- ¹² Many bulls surround me;
- ¹³ Roaring lions tearing their prey
open their mouths wide against me.
- ¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me.
- ¹⁵ My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
- strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.*

and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
 you lay me in the dust of death.

16 Dogs have surrounded me;
 a band of evil men has encircled me,

they have pierced my hands and my feet.
 17 I can count all my bones;
 people stare and gloat over me.
 18 They divide my garments among them
 and cast lots for my clothing.

Review

On this day of Good Friday, we think especially about the life of Jesus. He was killed on a Cross under the most horrendous of circumstances, and even though it was possible for His supporters to find thousands of people who would have testified in His support, Jesus was indeed crucified. On the one hand, hundreds of people had been healed or delivered of evil spirits by Jesus, and great crowds had appreciated His teaching on the Kingdom of God (Matt 13) and others had cheered Him on His way to Jerusalem (Matt 21:1f.); His disciples, of course, had also sworn undying oaths of allegiance to Him (Mark 14:31). On the other hand, the religious authorities who opposed Jesus had the benefit of a single aim, that of ridding Israel of a troublemaker who they feared would ferment unrest and bring the wrath of Rome on their perilously small state. Having isolated Jesus from His supporters, there is an air of unreality around the proceedings (recorded by all the Gospels) in which Jesus was finally taken, accused, abused, arraigned, condemned and then tortured before being hung on a cross to die.

Psalms speak of the life of Christ

It is remarkable, therefore, to be able to look back on an Old Testament passage of scripture such as Psalm 22:9-18, and read words that may have referred a long time ago to some other awful 'near death' experience, and find that it speaks to us prophetically about what happened to Jesus as He went to the Cross. All of the psalms have their own origins, and these are mostly unknown to us; but by the time of Jesus' life and death, the words of the psalms in general had found a wider use in describing all kinds of 'real' human experience of life. There is no reason therefore why we cannot read these words and let them speak to us directly about what happened to Jesus as He came near to the Cross.

Jesus' life, governed by God

The first few verses (22:9-11) speak of the humanity of Jesus, born of Mary and born of the Holy Spirit; 'from my birth I was cast upon You; from my mother's womb You have been my God' (22:10). The Lord God Himself had guided every part of Jesus' life and had led Him from the earliest days of His conception and birth to the final days of His tragic rejection by His own people. In those last few hours, as Jesus was abandoned even by those he loved, Psalm 22 appears to summarise the prayer that must surely have been in Jesus' heart; 'do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no-one to help.' (22:11). All Jesus' friends and disciples had fled, and the events of Jesus' last few hours appear chaotic, but God was in control.

Jesus' life, threatened

Psalm 22 then begins to describe a picture of death; 'Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths against me' (22:12,13). Some suggest that this is only a picture of a threat, not 'near death'. However, I suggest that if you have stood in a field surrounded by bulls in an aggressive mood, then you know what it is like to fear for your life, and something even more fearsome is described by the picture of the lions 'tearing their prey' and preparing to attack! Jesus must have known that he was nearing the end as He was threatened by Caiaphas and attacked

by the Temple guards (Mark 14:60,65f.). Fear is a terrible thing, and fear of death has been known to make people behave in odd ways, but Jesus maintained His composure and withstood the attacks on His person to such an extent that none other than the Roman Governor, Pilate, was impressed by the man presented to him for judgement (Mark 15:1f.).

Jesus is condemned to die

As Jesus was questioned by Pilate, we often wonder what Jesus must have felt. He appears to have had the bravery and the integrity to answer lucidly and correctly, even after a beating and the abuse He received (Mark 15:2-5). But what went through Jesus' mind as the crowd was summoned to give the final verdict on who should die? What did He think as they were manipulated by the Pharisees and religious authorities to shout for 'Jesus Barabbas', leaving a condemnation of crucifixion for the 'Son of Man'? We all know what it is like to feel drained when all is lost and there is no hope; 'I am poured out like water, and my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax ...' (22:14). Some scholars tell us that these words are simply a description of someone suffering the effects of drought; water has disappeared (22:14), food has run out and there is no strength (22:14,15), and the lack of water means that the tongue sticks to the roof of the mouth (22:15). Even those who were once well fed can 'count their bones (22:17), and those who survive gather around the one who is about to die to take from them whatever they can (22:17,18).

Jesus dies

But these words are not limited to any possible 'original meaning'. This description of death in this text is so well matched to what we read about the final hours of Jesus life (see Mark 15:16-39), we cannot just turn away from this text and imagine that God has not given it to us for a reason. Psalm 22 reminds us that death is real, whatever form it takes, and Jesus' death was also real. When we read the story of Christ's Passion in the Gospels, we do not read a spiritual fairy tale in which things happened to Jesus, 'but not really', because everything comes good a few days later. To be the true 'Son of God', Jesus had to go through real death on the Cross. It was awful, it was horrific and cruel, and these verses in Psalm 22 make us face this because they constitute one of the few detailed descriptions of real death to be found in the Old Testament. We all know that in a couple of days, we will celebrate Easter, but before Easter comes the death of Jesus as real as the death of any man or woman on earth, and Psalm 22 helps to remind us of this crucial, though appalling fact. We must dwell on this until the truth of the resurrection breaks upon us.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group the various points of this passage where there is a specific connection between this and the story of Jesus' death (see Mark 15).
2. Have you been close to death, and what has this felt like? In what ways does this Scripture remind you of this, if at all?
3. Do people really believe that Jesus died on the Cross, or do they prefer to believe that Jesus 'disappeared for a little'? Discuss.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

It is always hard for us to talk about death because the fact that we are alive means that we have not yet experienced it. I have been in a few situations where I have felt close to death, however, and each time, the experience has been particularly profound. I know of some people who have been so close to death that it is something that they do not feel able