



THE STRENGTH WE NEED

Every Christmas when I was a kid we used to watch the 'World's Strongest Man' competition on TV. And it was a great show, in large part because of the craziness of it all: weightlifters lugging Atlas stones, lobbing tree trunks and pulling aircraft with their teeth. And there was always a Viking!

And strength is what we're thinking about today – but not the 'World's Strongest Man' kind. We're talking the *resilient* kind - the strength to forgive people when they hurt us; to keep working at a marriage that's struggling; to be there for children or parents when it's hard to be; to cope with the death of a loved one; to persevere when our minds or bodies let us down.

Where can we find *that* level of strength? That's what today's prophecy – or better, song – is all about.

Psalm 22

Psalm 22 is less a prophecy, more a poem, written by King David around 1000 BC, and it's a cry for help in the face of enormous suffering. But in a way that only God could know, David's situation was also a foreshadowing of the crucifixion of Jesus. And it tells us 3 things about the source of Jesus' strength – and ours. We need to be:

1) Real – About Our Feelings. The psalm starts with the same words that Jesus prayed on the cross 1000 years later: *Eli, eli, lama azav'tani?* "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" I.e. "Where are you, God? Why have

You left Me? You were there for people in the past, and I've believed in You since I was a kid. So why am I being treated like ... like a worm?" (vs1-11).

Now some will say, "Well, Jesus prayed this prayer because He was absorbing all the sins of the world, and the Father couldn't intervene because this was all part of the plan." Or "The psalmist cries 'day and night', because at midday it went dark for 3 hours while Jesus went through Hell in our place." Or "The psalmist calls Himself a worm because in ancient times they'd use worm-blood to make dyes for garments, and Jesus' blood makes us beautiful." And all of that might be true on a theological level – but Jesus isn't talking on a theological level. He's talking on a gut-wrenching, deeply emotional level – hence the shout.

Now some of us might struggle with all this, because we're not supposed to shout at God, are we? Well, it all depends on how close we are. You guys only get to see the nice side of me (most of the time). But Kellie, Josh and Abi get to see the *real* me. They see me when I'm glad / sad / mad. But I can be honest with them - and they can be honest with me – because of the closeness of our relationship.

2) Real – About Our Fortunes. It can be easy to have this picture of Jesus as though His life – and His death – were somehow less 'real' than our own. In reality, He went through more suffering than most of us ever will. And in the poetry of vs12-21 we get a glimpse of it:

- **Wild animals have surrounded me.** A Jewish way of referring to non-Jews, in this case, Roman auxiliaries.
- **I am poured out like water.** This could refer either to perspiration, or to Jesus' life being 'offered up' to God.
- **All my bones are out of joint.** When people were nailed to crosses their arms and legs would dislocate.
- **My heart has turned to wax.** Jesus may have died from heart failure, causing the pericardium to rupture.
- **My strength is dried up.** And little wonder: no sleep, 3 trials at least, beaten up, tortured, and then crucified.
- **My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.** One of the 7 things Jesus said on the cross was, "I thirst."
- **You lay me in the dust of death.** A poetic way of saying, "I'm going the same way as everything else."
- **They have pierced my hands ...** The Hebrew reads "like a lion (*ka'ari*)", but it's the limbs that are the focus!
- **I can count all my bones.** A reference to the 'stretching out' of a body, making bones more visible.
- **People stare and gloat.** In fact, the religious leaders virtually quoted vs8 while Jesus hung on the cross!

- **They divide my garments and cast lots** ... The soldiers did exactly this with Jesus' shawl and tunic.

I.e. we might think that if we pray enough prayers or do enough good then bad things will never happen to us. But Jesus became a *real* human in a *real* world, and went through *real* suffering – just as we do. And just as Jesus was honest about *His* suffering – in this psalm, on that cross – so can we be. So if people ask, "How's it going?" it's OK to say, "Pretty crappy, really."

But that's not all ...

3) Real – About Our Future. In vs22, the psalmist suddenly flips from negative to positive. One minute he's suffering, the next minute rejoicing. And I believe we're getting insight as to what was going on in Jesus' psyche. Because generally speaking, if you wound up on a cross that was it – game over. But for Jesus it wasn't. And as Jesus hung on that cross, I reckon He had to keep reminding Himself of the fact that, 3 days later, He was going to rise from the dead, victorious, and He was going to be re-united with His friends. And that's what kept Him going: His future. And that can keep us going, too.

Hence vs22-31, and in particular, the end: "He has done it" or "He has finished it!" It's the same phrase Jesus shouted from the cross, just before He died: "It is? *Finished!*" A shout of victory! And no matter what we experience in life, if we know and love Jesus we're all going to shout it, one day. It's not going to last!

As a pastor-friend of Tony Campolo's once put it, over and over again, "It's Friday. But Sunday's comin'!"

Who Needs Spinach?

There will come a time for each of us when physical, emotional, and mental strength will give out. Where can we find the strength to carry on? In the One referred to as "My Strength" (vs19). And the way to tap into that Strength is to be *real* – about our feelings, our fortunes, but also our future. Jesus did it – and so can we, in Him.

So when you go through times of darkness, when you go through times of loneliness, when you go through times of pain, when you go through times of heartache, and even when you face death itself, may you know that Jesus has been there too – and come out the other side.

Not only that, but He's with you now, to give you the strength you need to keep on going, and not give up.