

Jesus and the Psalms

APRIL 11, 2011 [L. MICHAEL MORALES](#)

“What do you think of the Christ?” In guiding the Jerusalem leaders to contemplate this question of eternal weight, Jesus turned to the authority of what is written “in the book of Psalms,” specifically [Psalm 110](#) ([Matt 22:41–46](#); [Mark 12:35–37](#); [Luke 20:40–44](#)), and asked a question childlike in both simplicity and profundity, the answer to which plunges one into the unfathomable wonder of the incarnation of God: How could David refer to his son as Lord? This probing question was but the application of what Jesus would later declare, that he himself is the object of all the Scriptures of the Old Testament, summarizing their threefold division in [Luke 24:44](#) as “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms,” with the Psalms standing as the summary representative of the Writings.

That much of the Psalms concerns “the Christ” was (and is) commonly accepted; the New Testament’s glorious proclamation is that Jesus is this Christ, the long-expected “Anointed One” of whom these Scriptures speak. And so we read of Peter, who, after quoting two psalms, declared to the crowds gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost: “God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ” ([Acts 2:36](#)). We read of Paul, too, who reasoning from the Scriptures (again, the Old Testament), demonstrated that the Christ had to suffer and rise again, saying, “This Jesus, whom I preach to you, is the Christ” ([Acts 17:2–3](#)). The apostles, to be sure, drew heavily from the Psalms for their inspired testimony regarding the person and work of Christ. The book of Hebrews, for example, is woven together by psalms, showing us that Jesus is the “son of man” of [Psalm 8](#) who was made “for a little while lower than the angels” through the incarnation but now has been crowned “with glory and honor” through his resurrection and ascension ([Heb. 2:5–9](#)). Matthew’s gospel unveils the Psalms as key to Jesus’ own self-understanding, Satan quoting [Psalm 91](#) to him in the wilderness ([Matt 4:6](#)) and Jesus, upon the cross of agony, sifting his suffering through the sieve of [Psalm 22](#): “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ([Matt. 27:46](#)). That he meditated often on the Psalms, and upon what they spoke concerning himself, is evident in how Jesus summarized his suffering and exaltation with the lines of [Psalm 118:22](#): “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” ([Matt 21:42](#); see also [Mark 12:10](#); [Luke 20:17](#); [Acts 4:11](#); [1 Pet 2:7](#)).

The Sufferings of Christ

When Jesus expressed his anguish on the cross with the words of [Psalm 22](#), he highlighted one of the precious facets of the Psalms in general, namely, that as songs they uniquely convey the inward depths of the soul, and especially of Christ's soul. Not only do the Psalms help shape our response to God in the trials and joys of life, then, but they also reveal to us something of the inner life of Jesus Christ, glimpses we do not have through the Gospels alone. In the upper room, when he declared his betrayer was the "one who is dipping bread into the dish with me," adding that the Son of Man "goes as it is written of him" ([Mark 14:20–21](#)), Jesus likely had [Psalm 41](#) in mind, verse 9 of which paints more fully the pangs of his soul: "Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me." (Peter, in [Acts 1:15–20](#), would urge replacing Judas as an apostle on the authority of what "is written in the Book of Psalms," specifically [Psalms 69:25](#) and 109:8.) In John's account of the crucifixion, we are taken from the narrated outward act of the soldiers casting lots for Christ's tunic to [Psalm 22:18](#) and the inward emotions of the Man of Sorrows himself: "They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" ([John 19:24](#)). Later, as he suffered to the end upon the cross, Christ quoted another psalm (after [Psalm 22](#)), praying to the Father with his last breath the words of [Psalm 31:5](#) — "Into your hands I commit my spirit" ([Luke 23:46](#)). This psalm opens a window both into his grief—"I am repulsive to those who know me . . . I hear the slander of many"—and into his confident trust in the character and promises of God—"My times are in your hand." It is even possible that, as he committed his spirit to the Father, Jesus was also comforted by the words of [Psalm 16](#) regarding his body: "My flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption" (vv. 9–10). The apostle Peter, as we will see, certainly applies this psalm to the resurrection. But even [Psalm 22](#) follows the great cry of dereliction with the joyous declaration that God has not "hidden his face from him; but when he cried to him, he heard" (v. 24).

The Glories of Christ

The Psalms also give us insight into the great exaltation of Christ, an exaltation that begins with the resurrection, is followed by the ascension, and culminates in the coronation, so that, as King of kings, only Savior, and ultimate Judge, he reigns over all the nations. Returning to that first sermon at Pentecost, Peter quotes four

verses from [Psalm 16](#), insisting that David, the “sweet psalmist of Israel” ([2 Sam. 23:1](#)), was here speaking as a prophet, having foreseen the resurrection of Christ, who was the fruit of his body ([Acts 2:25–31](#)). David’s flesh, after all, had seen corruption and was still in the grave; thus, Peter reasons, the Scriptures, which cannot fail, must have spoken “about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption” ([Acts 2:31](#); see also [Acts 13:35–36](#)). Then Peter immediately moves to [Psalm 110](#) (which is, in fact, the most quoted and alluded to psalm in the New Testament) to demonstrate the ascension and coronation of Jesus: “The LORD said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Therefore, Peter deduces and declares, let all Israel know assuredly that God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ ([Acts 2:34–36](#)).

Another psalm utilized often in the New Testament is [Psalm 2](#), particularly verses 7–8: “The Lord said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage.’” The apostles consistently affirm the resurrection as this “begetting” of Christ in the sense that as God raised him up from the dead, giving him “birth” into new creation glory, the Father was powerfully declaring Jesus Christ—not merely his eternal Son but the incarnate Messiah—to be his Son and reigning King (see [Acts 13:30–34](#)). The divine, eternal Son of God, after experiencing the humility of our humanity in the incarnation, and after descending to the lowest place as the Suffering Servant, now in history carries our humanity with him in his great exaltation to the highest place, installed at the Father’s right hand to reign as far as the curse is found. The apostles even interpret their persecution in light of the “raging of the nations” against Christ, the appointed King, as described in [Psalm 2:1–2](#) ([Acts 4:25–28](#)), and Christ himself, when he commands the apostles to disciple the nations in the Great Commission ([Matt 28:18–20](#)), is but claiming the post-resurrection promise of God to the King he has installed in Zion: “Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage” ([Ps. 2:8](#)). The author of Hebrews utilizes [Psalm 2:7](#) to develop the glory of Christ as the exalted High Priest ([Heb. 5:5](#)), which he establishes by repeated references to [Psalm 110:4](#): “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek” ([Heb. 5:5–6; 7:1–28](#)). We also learn in Hebrews that, as our High Priest who ministers in the heavenly realities on our behalf, Jesus Christ has become the worship leader of the church, the One who leads the praise of the redeemed in the words of [Psalm 22:22](#): “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I

will sing your praise” ([Heb. 2:12](#)). This praise is the everlasting response to Christ’s resurrection, that is, to his prayer cried out from the cross of agony, for “you have answered me” ([Ps. 22:21](#); see also [Ps. 118:21–22](#)). Indeed, much of the New Testament’s teaching on Christ’s continued work as our Prophet, Priest, and King in his state of exaltation is founded firmly upon the book of Psalms. Paul even explains the gifts of the Spirit from the ascended Christ to his church through the lens of [Psalm 68:18](#)—“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men” ([Eph 4:7–16](#)).

Thus, the New Testament continually uses the book of Psalms to fix our gaze upon the excellences’ of Christ, upon the majesty, beauty, and glory of the One who through his humiliation and exaltation reigns over the nations, leading them to the heavenly Mount Zion so that, lost in wonder, love, and praise, they may proclaim eternally the glory of the triune God.