

# Luke 23:35-43

- “Today you will be with me in paradise.” -

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## Introduction

- ❖ The part of the Passion Narrative, where Jesus said to one of the two criminals who had been crucified, that he would be in paradise that same day, shows the paradox of faith. A paradox is a statement that runs contrary to one's expectation.
  - A criminal facing a painful and cruel death asks Jesus, who is under the same sentence, although he had nothing done wrong, and is dying the same death, to remember him when he comes into his kingdom.
  - The rulers, the soldiers, the criminal(s) were sneering, mocking and hurling at Jesus. If you are the Christ of God, the chosen one, the King of the Jews? They didn't believe it. At the same time, as the crucified one, he is the Christ of God, the chosen one, the King of the Jews. At the same time, “the narrative contrasts the two attitudes which lead to condemnation and salvation.”<sup>1</sup>
  - A greater contrast is unthinkable: a cruel impending death versus the bliss of Paradise: crucifixion and humiliation versus death and glorification.
- ❖ There is an intriguing question. How is it possible that Jesus promised the criminal: “today you will be with me in Paradise” and that he rose on the third day and ascended to heaven after forty days?
  - If we take Paradise as a location, where those who have been admitted abide after their death, we are facing a logical problem. Paradise is primarily total communion with the Living Father, as it was meant in the beginning (Genesis 2, 3). In this sense, Jesus enters

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall, I. H. (1978, p. 870).

Paradise at the moment he prays: "'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.'" When he had said this, he breathed his last" (Lk 23:46). xx

- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Gospel of Luke. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a “stand-alone”. You can also fit this outline into a series of sermons.

## Context

- ❖ What is the context of Luke 23:39-43?
  - It is part of the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion, and the death of Jesus.

<b>The arrest and trial of Jesus (Lk 22:47-23:25)</b>	
Lk 22:47-53	The arrest of Jesus
Lk 22:54-72	Jesus at the house of the high priest
Lk 23:1-25	Jesus before Pilate, Herod, and again before Pilate.
<b>The crucifixion and the death of Jesus (Lk 23:26-49)</b>	
Lk 23:26-33	From Pilate to Golgotha, the crucifixion of Jesus and the two criminals.
Lk 23:34	The first saying of Jesus: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."
Lk 23:35-37	The people, the rulers, and the soldiers are mocking at Jesus.
Lk 23:38	The written notice: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.
Lk 23:39-43	The two criminals and Jesus. The second saying of Jesus: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."
Lk 23:44-46	His last words, the third saying, and the death of Jesus: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."
Lk 23:47-49	The centurion, the people, and the followers of Jesus witnessed his death.

## The burial of Jesus (Lk 23:50-56)

Lk 23:50-56	The burial of Jesus.
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### Form and structure

❖ A detailed outline of Luke 23:35-43

Verse	Narrative	Discourse
35	The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said,	"He saved others; <b>let him save himself</b> if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One."
36, 37	The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said,	"If you are the king of the Jews, <b>save yourself.</b> "
38	There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.	
39	One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him:	"Aren't you the Christ? <b>Save yourself</b> and us!"
40	But the other criminal rebuked him. He said,	"Don't you fear God,
41		since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."
42	Then he said,	"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."
43	Jesus answered him,	"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

❖ A comparison of the mockery:

Verse	Who?	The mockery:

35	The people and the rulers:	“He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.”
36, 37	The soldiers:	“If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”
39	One of the criminals:	“Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

## Technical notes and theological background

### Crucifixion<sup>2</sup>

#### ❖ A historical and geographical overview

- The Greek historian Herodotus (5<sup>th</sup> century BC) writes that the Persians practised crucifixion as a form of execution. King Darius (512–485 BC) had 3000 inhabitants of Babylon crucified. There are reports of mass crucifixion in the Greek-speaking world (4<sup>th</sup> century BC; Alexander the Great). The people of Carthago (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC) used crucifixion for execution. In 267 BC, Judea saw the crucifixion of men who remained faithful to Jewish law. Alexander Jannaeus (the Sadducean high priest, 103–76 BC), had 800 Pharisees crucified. Julius Caesar (1<sup>st</sup> century BC) tells that the Numidians (Africa) practised this form of execution. Tacitus, the 1<sup>st</sup>-century Roman historian, writes about crucifixion among the Germans and Britons.
- According to the Old Testament law, the corpses of executed idolaters and blasphemers were hanged on a tree to show that they were accursed by God (Dt 21:22–23; Gal 3:13).

#### ❖ B. The Romans and Crucifixion

- Cicero, a Roman statesman (1<sup>st</sup> century BC), calls crucifixion the most extreme form of execution. The Roman used it as a punishment for foreigners, people of the lower class, slaves and violent criminals. They also used crucifixion to terrify mutinous troops and conquered people, and rebellious cities under siege. Sometimes large numbers of people were crucified (6000 slaves after a slave uprising against the Roman republic 71 BC). Josephus, who witnessed men dying by crucifixion during the siege of Jerusalem (70 CE), calls it “the most wretched of deaths”. Normally Roman citizens were safe from the possibility of crucifixion, no matter what their crimes.
- Quintilian (ca. 35–95 CE) thought that this form of execution had a better deterrent effect when the crosses were set up along the busiest roads. “Whenever we crucify the guilty, the most crowded roads are chosen, where the most people can see and be

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<sup>2</sup> This paragraph is based on O’Collins, G. G. (1992, p. 1207-1210). *Crucifixion*. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.).

moved by this fear. For penalties relate not so much to retribution as to their exemplary effect.”

- There were almost no public protests against this cruel form of execution.

#### ❖ C. The practice of Crucifixion

- Crucifixion normally included a flogging beforehand (Jn 19:1). There was a cross-piece attached either at the top of a vertical stake to give the shape of a “T” or just below the top, as in the form most familiar in Christian symbolism. (See also John 19:19.) The victims carried the cross or at least a transverse beam to the place of execution (Jn 19:17), where they were stripped (Jn 19:23) and bound or nailed to the beam (Jn 20:25), raised up, and seated on a small wooden peg in the upright beam. Ropes bound the shoulders or torso to the cross. The feet or heels of the victims were bound or nailed to the upright stake. John doesn’t mention nail marks in the feet or heels of Jesus, probably the feet of Jesus were bound. As crucifixion damaged no vital organs, death could come slowly, sometimes after several days of atrocious pain.

#### ❖ D. Jesus’ Crucifixion

- Jesus foretold his death (Mt 20:19; 26:2). Some of Jesus' followers would suffer the same fate (Mt 23:34). According to the tradition, the apostle Peter was crucified in Rome hanging upside down when Nero was emperor (54-68 CE). Peter died probably in 64 CE. The crucifixion of Jesus is told in Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, and John 19.

#### ❖ E. The crucifixion and the New Testament

- The apostle Peter:
  - "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).
- The apostle Paul:
  - "we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:23, 24; see also Gal 3:1).
  - "No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:7, 8; see also Rev 11:8).
- The (theological) meaning of the cross (summary):
  - "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18).
  - “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'" (Gal 3: 13).

"If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— because anyone who has died has been freed from sin" (Rom 6:5-7; see also Gal 2:19, 20; 6:14).

"His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (Eph 1:15, 16; see also Col 1:20).

"And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phill 2:8-11).

- The cross means salvation, reconciliation, and a new creation for all those who believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God, who appeared as a man and humbled himself and became obedient, even to death on a cross. The cross reveals the ultimate love of Jesus for sinners.

The cross of Christ is the paradox of the Christian faith, which can only be fully understood from the perspective of the resurrection and glorification of Christ otherwise:

"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Cor 15:17-19).

### Lexicographical comments

❖ "save" = "σῶζω":

❖ 1. to preserve or rescue from natural dangers and afflictions, *save, keep from harm, preserve, rescue*:

- a. *save from (danger of death* (Lk 23:35, 37, 39
- b. *bring out safely* from a situation fraught with (mortal) danger and oppression;
- c. *save/free from disease* (Lk 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). Passive: *be restored to health, get well* (Lk 8:36). Also of the restoration that comes about when death has already occurred (Lk 8:50).

2. to save or preserve from transcendent danger or destruction, *save/preserve from eternal death* from judgment, and from all that might lead to such death, for example, sin; also in a positive sense *bring Messianic salvation, bring to salvation*.<sup>3</sup>

## Exposition

### Introduction

- ❖ Who is Jesus according to the Gospel of Luke?
  - He is the Christ: Luke 1:32–33; 2:11, 26; 4:41; 9:20) the King of the Jews
  - He is the King of the Jews: Luke 1:32–33; 19:38; cf. 2:4; 18:38–39.
- ❖ He must suffer:
  - Jesus had already foretold what would happen to him (Lk 9:22; 17:25; Mt 16:21; 17:12; Mk 8:13; 9:12).
- ❖ He must suffer unjustly (to be able to justify sinners):
  - Jesus has been crucified, although Pilate tried to release him because he had nothing done to deserve death (Lk 23:4, 16, 20, 22).

### Verse 35-39 (*The mockery of the people, the soldiers and the one criminal*)

- ❖ **“The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said.”** Who are these rulers?
  - They are the leaders of the Jewish people and according to Matthew, “the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders” (Mt 27:41; Lk 23:13). Especially the rulers were sneering among themselves about Jesus. They were not directly sneering at Jesus as the soldiers did. They said: **“let him”** whereas the soldiers mocked: **“if you.”** The people are looking at a spectacle.
  - For purposes of vividness, Luke uses three different words to describe the contempt of the rulers (to **sneer**), the soldiers (to **mock**), one of the criminals (to **hurl**).
    - See also Psalm 22:7. Compare The Greek Old Testament (Ps 21:8).
- ❖ **“He saved others.”** What did the rulers mean?
  - Apparently, they haven't witnessed the acts of salvation, such as healings. They must have relied on the stories told by the people. For the meaning of salvation, see the lexicographical comments. They didn't mean eternal salvation but salvation out of a life-threatening situation. Jesus was crucified and they didn't expect any miraculous act. At

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<sup>3</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 982).

the same time, they were discrediting the previous works of salvation done by Jesus. It shouldn't surprise us if they didn't believe any of the stories told by the people about acts of salvation.

❖ **“let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.”** (See Isa 42:1; Lk 9:35). Why?

- The rulers referred to the trial by the council of elders (Lk 22:67-71). “‘If you are the Christ,’ they said, ‘tell us.’ Jesus answered, ‘If I tell you, you will not believe me.’” Jesus, the Christ, didn’t come to save himself (Lk 4:32) but sinners.
- See also Psalm 22:8: “He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”
- “The fact that Jesus was dying on the cross was plain evidence to these Jews that God had not elected but had rejected Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> See also Deuteronomy 21:22, 23: “If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, **because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse.**”
  - But at the same time: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree’ (Gal 3:13).
  - **Yes, he is the Christ of God, the chosen one!**

❖ **“The soldiers also came up and mocked him.”** What is the picture?

- The soldiers stood at some distance. They guarded the crosses. They came up to the cross, probably because Jesus (and the other criminals) were losing their consciousness. While the soldiers approach, they mocked him.

❖ **“They offered him wine vinegar.”** Why?

- 1. Wine, with some alcohol, can relieve some pain; 2. It can relieve the feeling of thirst; 3. **The vinegar could dissolve the mucus**, which developed during the breathing through the mouth. The accumulation of mucus made breathing difficult. The result was prolonged suffering!

❖ **“If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”** Why?

- The soldiers didn’t believe that Jesus was the king of the Jews. King Herod didn’t believe this (Lk 23:11), and Pilate judged more than three times that this man was not guilty (Lk 23:4, 17, 20, 22). This disbelief is also expressed in: “save yourself.”

❖ **“There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”** What is the purpose of this notice?

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<sup>4</sup> Lenski, R. C. H. (1961, p. 1137).

- The Romans normally wrote a short notice on top of the cross, mentioning the crime. This also explains the mocking of the soldiers.
- Pilate humiliated the Jews, taking revenge because the Jews forced him to crucify Jesus, although: “You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him” (Lk 23:14).
  - Pilate and Herod didn’t believe that Jesus was some kind of a king.
- At the same time, it is a vindication of Jesus. He is the promised King of the Jews. See also John 18:33-37.

❖ **“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”** What does this reveal about this criminal?

- We don’t know what his crime was. Barabbas awaiting his execution, was exchanged for Jesus, was a murderer and had been put into prison for insurrection (Lk 23:19).
- He didn’t show any remorse. He accepted his judgment, fate, and impending death. He doesn't believe in any salvation. "His question presupposes the answer 'Yes', but it is bitterly sarcastic. He calls on Jesus to save them all without believing that he can do it."<sup>5</sup>
- (Lk 9:24; 17:33: “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”)
- According to Matthew (27:44) and Mark (15:32), both criminals mocked Jesus and one of them stopped mocking.
- “hurled” = “βλασφημέω”. Marshall comments: “To mock Jesus by refusing to take his powers seriously is to blaspheme against him; the use of the verb represents a Christian verdict in the light of who Jesus is.”<sup>6</sup>

Verse 40-43 (*The other criminal and Jesus*)

❖ **“But the other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God, he said, “since you are under the same sentence?”**” What is the difference between him and the other criminal?

- This criminal fears God! He accepts his sentence as a just sentence. And he knows, that there is no point of return. See Luke 12:4-6: “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell.”

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<sup>5</sup> Morris, L. (1988, Vol. 3, p. 346).

<sup>6</sup> Marshall, I. H. (1978, p. 781). Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 178).

- ❖ **“We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”** What is the judgment of the criminal?
  - Jesus had done nothing wrong, not according to Roman law, not according to Jewish law, and not according to God’s law.
  - Interesting: it is the criminal who justifies Jesus!
- ❖ **“Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’”** What does his request reveal?
  - 1. It reveals faith in Jesus. 2. The death of Jesus on the cross, will not be the end. Although this criminal doesn’t know yet how and why he believes that Jesus is able to remember him. 3. The criminal fears the judgment of God. Jesus can be his advocate: **“Remember me.”** 4. He believes that when Jesus comes into his kingdom, he still will be outside of the kingdom (in darkness?). 5. He confirms that Jesus is king, not a future king. Jesus will enter his kingdom today. 6. In a sense, he commits his spirit into the hands of Jesus (see Lk 23:46; also Acts 7:59). 7. Salvation will be available to him not by a Jesus who will miraculously come off the cross, but by the death of Jesus. 7. He probably also believes in the resurrection, which is more than the afterlife.
    - **“your kingdom.”** The kingdom of heaven has been given to Jesus. It is the Messianic Kingdom. See also Matthew 28:18-20: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."
    - Does he believe that Jesus is the Messiah according to Psalm 110:1: **“The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’”**
  - His faith is against all odds. Lenski writes: “Jesus is dying on the cross, he is in a worse condition than either of the malefactors, is hounded to his death by all those about his cross, and yet this malefactor sees in him the One who will come in connection with his kingdom.”<sup>7</sup>
- ❖ **“Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.’”** What is the meaning of this promise?
  - 1. Jesus assures the criminal. **“I tell you the truth” = “truly, I say you”** (ESV). “Truly”, introduces always a solemn declaration. “This formula is a substitute for the Old Testament prophetic ‘Thus says the Lord’ without the name of God. It serves to lend weight and authority to the statement which follows.”<sup>8</sup> This assurance reveals the godly character of Jesus. A human being cannot assure anything like this.

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<sup>7</sup> Lenski, R. C. H. (1961, p. 1144).

<sup>8</sup> Reiling, J., & Swellengrebel, J. L. (1993, p. 207).

- 2. This assurance is meant to take the fear of death and the judgment of God away. He already passed the judgment. The judgment has been given to him: “**But from now on**, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God” (Lk 22:69). Compare “**But from now on**” with “**today**”.
- 3. “**Today**” answers the question of the criminal “**when**.” Marshall comments: “If his thoughts are fixed on entry to the kingdom of God at the end of the world, Jesus promises him salvation here and now, the certainty of being in paradise with him that very day. Jesus’ kingly power is to be operative for salvation forthwith.”<sup>9</sup>
- 4. Jesus’ response is perhaps the most beautiful promise in Scripture.”<sup>10</sup>
- 5. For Paradise see Genesis 2:8-17; 3:22-24. See also Revelation 3:7; 22:1-5. But, if we take Paradise as a location, where those who have been admitted abide after their death, we are facing a logical problem. Paradise is primarily total communion with the Living Father, as it was meant in the beginning (Genesis 2, 3). In this sense, Jesus enters Paradise at the moment he prays: “‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ When he had said this, he breathed his last” (Lk 23:46).

#### The resurrection (Lk 24)

- ❖ Why is the resurrection important for the understanding of this passage?
  - The resurrection is the confirmation that Jesus is the Christ and the King of the Jews. Jesus said to his disciples: “**Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?**”

## Application

#### Reading

- ❖ It is advisable to read this story aloud a couple of times to feel the.

#### Praise

- ❖ Praise Christ for his:
  - love (Jn 3:16; 15:13);
  - faithfulness unto death;
  - mercy and grace (shown to the criminal) and to all who believe in his name.

#### Salvation

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<sup>9</sup> Marshall, I. H. (1978, p. 780).

<sup>10</sup> Osborne, G. R. (2018, p. 548).

- ❖ “Jesus’ cross is intimately involved in his being able to ‘seek and to save what was lost’ (19:10) and to forgive sins (5:20–26; 7:36–50; Acts 10:39–43); in this account he is able to save even the “most lost.” Tax collectors, prostitutes, the poor, the blind, and even criminals being executed for their crimes are able in the eleventh hour to find in Jesus an all-sufficient Savior.”<sup>11</sup> The characters standing around the cross, react differently to the cross of the Savior, "who dies on the cross not for his own sins but for those of others, an indication of who may, and who may not, benefit from that offer of salvation.”<sup>12</sup>

### The contrasts

- ❖ The rulers said: “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.”
  - He died to save others (Lk 23:43).
  - As the crucified one, he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One (Lk 3: 22; 9:20; 22:67-70).
- ❖ The soldiers mocked and said: “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”
  - He is the King of the Jews, the promised one: “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (Lk 1:32, 33).
- ❖ The criminal said: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”
  - The drama unfolds. Not he, but the other criminal was saved. He said recognized Jesus as the Christ of God, the Chosen One, the King.

### The minds and hearts of men are unmasked:

- ❖ Man can let someone suffer unto death, while he is innocent, according to Pilate, Herod, and the soldiers, and even the Jewish rulers, because they couldn’t find any charge against him.
- ❖ Man can stand and watch someone suffering as some kind of event. "The people stood." This has been of all times, especially in the Roman theatres where people were looking at people being killed by each other, or by animals.
- ❖ Man can make fun of the sufferer, by sneering, mocking and hurling, even when his condition is hopeless.
- ❖ Man can combine cruelty with mercy, with the purpose of prolonged suffering.
- ❖ As conclusion:
  - There was no mercy for the one who was merciful.

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<sup>11</sup> Stein, R. H. (1992, Vol. 24, p. 593).

<sup>12</sup> Wilcock, M. (1979, p. 203).

- There was no justice for the one who didn't sin of
- There was no peace for the one who forgave the sins of others.
- ❖ Many people, and not only the one criminal, didn't fear God.
  - This is also the reason why people wage war on each other, persecute Christians and other people, and commit sins.

#### The paradox of faith

- ❖ The second criminal is saved by grace alone.
- ❖ The cross of death becomes the tree of life.

#### The Psalms and the suffering of Christ

- ❖ Not only Psalm 22 but also other Psalms provide a background to understand the suffering and the reactions of the people.
  - See for instance Psalm 3:1, 2; 42:10; 71:11; 91:14. Psalm 91 is quoted by the devil when he tempted Christ: "If you are the son of God..." (Mt 4:5-7).

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