

PSALM 34:15-22

IS THIS MESSIANIC AND HOW DOES IT APPLY TO US?¹

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The question under consideration in this paper centers on verse 20, "He kept all his bones: not one of them is broken" (NASB). Is this the text that is being quoted and fulfilled in John 19:36 where John writes, "For these things came to pass, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, 'Not a bone of Him shall be broken'" (NASB). Is Psalm 34:15-22, especially verse 20, a Messianic prophecy declared to be fulfilled in the New Testament? In order to answer this question we have to briefly summarize what is meant by a Messianic prophecy or psalm.

Interestingly enough, Bonhoeffer implies that the entire Psalter is Messianic. He writes, "And Jesus Himself says about the Psalms in general that they announced His death and His resurrection and the preaching of the gospel, Luke 24:44 ff" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, p. 20). Now it is indeed true that this Psalm, the Psalter, and the entire Old Testament find their fulfillment in Christ and His work, but this is not the concept that we have in mind when we speak of a Messianic psalm.

A directly Messianic psalm is a psalm in which there is a specific prophecy concerning Messiah, His person, and His work as one finds in Psalm 8, Psalm 22, and Psalm 110. A directly Messianic psalm, or part of a psalm, refers to Christ and Him only. This is Fuerbringer's point when he states, "Another common error of exegetes with regard to Messianic prophecies must be avoided; he must insist that these prophecies may have only one meaning, not two or more" (Ludwig Fuerbringer, *Theological Hermeneutics*, p. 18). A directly Messianic psalm is fulfilled only in Christ, not in David first, then God's people, and finally in Messiah. With this understanding, Psalm 34:15-22 is not a directly Messianic psalm.

The Psalm, especially verse 20, however, does refer to Christ. The affliction and the divine keeping of bones spoken of here refers first of all to David and all the righteous ones, but at the same time these things are a type or a picture of Jesus' suffering and the divine protection of His bones on the cross. Only through the intervening type of David and the righteous ones does it refer to Christ. This Psalm then typologically refers to Jesus, or in Louis Berkhof's terminology it is "indirectly" Messianic (Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 156). Also these verses refer to Jesus because they find fulfillment in the righteous ones of whom Jesus is a part, in fact He is the Righteous One *par excellence*. Stoeckhardt preaching concerning the significance of Jesus' legs not being broken said, "He (God) would herewith witness, that this crucified one, this hanged one, this cursed one, belongs to the generation (race) of the righteous, the holy ones of God of whom the Psalmist said: 'He keeps all his bones, from them not one is broken,' Psalm 34:20" (George Stoeckhardt, *Passionspredigten*, Vol. II, p. 133). The reason why this Psalm is not directly Messianic and how it applies to us will be explained more fully in the exegetical section of this paper.

This Psalm was written by David after he returned from his self-imposed exile in the land of the Philistines. The Psalm can be outlined thus: verses 1-3 David praises the Lord and

¹ NOTE: The verse numbering for this psalm in modern English translations is different from the numbering in the Masoretic Hebrew text. The numbering in this paper reflects the numbering in modern English translations. The Hebrew numbers are simply one more than the English numbers, i.e. verse 17 in English is verse 18 in Hebrew.

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asks the righteous to join him, verses 4-10 David states the reason why God should be praised, verses 11-22 David's instruction for the righteous. While verse 7 is not part of this exegesis, it does give significant insight to the question at hand. Here David speaks of the Angel of the Lord camping around those who fear him. מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה "the Angel of the Lord" refers to the pre-incarnate Christ in the Old Testament. If the term "the righteous" in verse 19 refers specifically to Christ, it would seem rather odd that two entirely different terms for Christ are both used to refer to Him in the same context. Also, the context implies that those who fear God in verse 7 are the same group as the righteous in verse 19. Thus you could come to the odd conclusion that Christ is camping around Himself.

15 (ב) עֵינֵי יְהוָה אֶל־צְדִיקִים וְאָזְנוֹ אֶל־שׁוֹעֲתָם:
 16 (ב) פָּנֵי יְהוָה בַּעֲשֵׂי רָע לְהַכְרִית מֵאֶרֶץ זִכְרָם:
 17 (ג) צַעֲקוּ וַיְהוָה שָׁמַע וּמִכָּל־צָרוֹתֵם הִצִּילָם:
 18 (ד) קָרוֹב יְהוָה לְנִשְׁבְּרֵי־לֵב וְאֶת־דַּפְּאֵי־רוּחַ יוֹשִׁיעַ:
 19 (ה) רַבּוֹת רָעוֹת צְדִיק וּמִכָּל־ם יִצִּילֵנוּ יְהוָה:
 20 (ו) שֹׁמֵר כָּל־עֲצוּמוֹתָיו אַחַת מִהֵנָּה לֹא נִשְׁבָּרָה:
 21 (ז) תְּמוֹתַת רָשָׁע רָעָה וְשִׁנְאֵי צְדִיק יִאֲשָׁמוּ:
 22 פּוֹדֵה יְהוָה נַפְשׁ עַבְדּוֹ וְלֹא יִאֲשָׁמוּ כָל־הַחֲסִים בּוֹ:

Verse 15 "The eyes of Yahweh are toward the righteous and His ears are toward their cry."

צְדִיקִים – "righteous." The masc. plural adjective is a very important word in this study. For it the Septuagint translates δίκαιος. Because the singular and plural of righteous are used interchangeably in this section, it is very hard to prove that "the righteous" refers directly to Christ.

What does it mean to be one of the righteous ones? There is only one who is originally righteous in Himself and able to declare righteous, the one true God. Yet, by the sending of the Righteous One many are declared righteous, for He Himself bore their sins (Isaiah 53:11). To be a righteous one is to be declared righteous in Christ. All those who have faith in Messiah are part of this group. Speaking concerning the meaning of the different words formed from צְדִיק "to be holy" from which the word righteous in this verse is formed, August Pieper writes, "Nevertheless, HITSDIQ is still a forensic concept, not in the strict sense of the pronouncement of righteousness to someone because he has been found to be righteous, but as a pronouncement of salvation to him, without regard to his personal state of righteousness" (August Peiper, *Isaiah II*, p. 453).

Also the structure of the word צְדִיק is interesting. Its formation seems similar to the passive participle of the Pe'al in Aramaic. חָסִיד "pious" has a similar formation. The basic meaning of these words would seem to be passive rather than active. צְדִיק then would mean

“one who has received righteousness”, and **קָטִיב** “one who has received mercy.”

A proper understanding of “the righteous” is necessary in order for the poor sinner to pray this Psalm and to find comfort in it. About a month ago, I was reading this Psalm on a hospital call. When I finished reading, the aged lady looked at me and said, “The Psalmist says that the Lord will hear the cry of the righteous, but I am a sinner. Will He hear my prayer?” Realizing that the righteous are poor sinners declared righteous by faith in Christ, this woman and all of us may cry unto the Lord knowing that His ears are attentive to our prayer. No matter how difficult the way, the Lord is watching over us in His providential care. Even in the loneliest times He hears our cry.

Verse 16 *“The face of Yahweh is against the ones doing evil to cut off the memory of them from the earth.”*

This Psalm is acrostic, that is, alphabetical. At one time the **ב** may have preceded the **ו** in the Hebrew alphabet as seen in Lamentations 2-4. Certain scholars say that this was the original order of the verses here, but a later scribe put the **ו** line before the **ב** line to make it conform to the present alphabetical order. Thus, the order of the verses would be 16, 15, and 17. While this would make the subject of verse 16 more obvious, there is really no problem in understanding the order as it stands. Also, there is no proof for such a change in the ancient manuscripts or versions. The Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and Peshitta all follow the traditional order.

The phrase “the face of Yahweh” **פְּנֵי יְהוָה** Usually means “the presence of Yahweh,” but in this case it means “the anger of Yahweh” as it does in Lam. 4:16, Jer. 44:11, and Lev. 20:5. Here the ones doing evil are threatened with the wrath and displeasure of God. The **ב** is used in the hostile sense of “against” as in Psalm 124:3. Those doing evil are the exact opposite of the righteous in the previous verse. They are not declared righteous by faith and not renewed by the Spirit. Because of their impenitence, they are the objects of the Lord’s wrath.

The result of the Lord’s wrath against the evil doers is that the memory of them will be cut off from the earth. “He (the Psalmist) speaks particularly of this kind of punishment, because the ungodly not only expect that they shall be happy during their whole life, but also imagine that they shall enjoy immortality in this world” (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, Vol. I, pp. 569-570). Just think of how many unbelievers today think of immortality only in terms of being remembered here on earth. Here is the Lord’s warning for them. In 1 Peter 3:12, the Apostle quotes this passage to give us comfort in time of persecution and sorrow, and to give us patience in trial.

Verse 17 *“(The righteous) cry and Yahweh hears and from all their troubles He delivers them.”*

For clarity “the righteous” has been added to the translation. This is obviously the meaning of the context. The Septuagint and the Aramaic Targums simply add “the righteous” to the text. The righteous cry out in prayer and the Lord hears them. The Lord always hears our prayers and He will help, He will deliver us. The cry from the depths of the soul that despairs of itself and trusts in God is acceptable to Him.

Notice that all the verb forms in this verse are perfects, yet they are translated in the present tense rather than the past. The main emphasis of the perfect is completed action, in comparison to the continuous action of the imperfect. Whether it is completed action in the past, present, or future is decided mainly by context.

Verse 18 *“Near is Yahweh to the brokenhearted and the ones crushed in spirit He saves.”*

קרוב qal infinitive absolute of קרב “to be near” shows that the Lord is in a state of being near those brokenhearted and crushed in spirit. Not only is He near them, but in Isaiah 57:15 the Prophet shows that He even dwells in the crushed in spirit. He, who fills all things in the universe, in His grace dwells in the brokenhearted. The reason for the Lord’s presence is to resuscitate spirit and heart.

Similar terms to נשבר־יֵלֵב “the brokenhearted” and דכּא־רוּחַ “the crushed in spirit” are found in Isaiah 61:1, Isaiah 57:15, Psalm 147:3, and Psalm 51:17. The brokenhearted are those in whom self-love and self-righteousness have been completely broken down by the law and the afflictions of this life. The crushed in spirit are those whose natural pride has been pulverized into dust as the Hebrew word implies. Both these terms picture the penitent sinner. His spirit has been broken and pulverized in sorrow over his sins, he confesses them, and receives the redemption found in Messiah’s blood. His broken heart is bound up by the Lord’s Anointed. The repentant of this verse are the righteous, those declared righteous by faith. To these the Lord continually brings His salvation.

Verse 19 *“Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but from all them Yahweh delivers him.”*

Notice that צַדִּיק “the righteous” is here in the singular. From this it might be concluded that now the Psalmist is speaking of one in particular, the Righteous One, Jesus Christ. This view, however, is not valid on grammatical grounds. In Hebrew literature it is common to see the singular and the plural of צַדִּיק used interchangeably as in Psalm 37:12-17.

The truth of this verse is seen again and again in our lives. We face difficulties and problems all the way. St. Paul says, “We must through much tribulation enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Afflictions may be different: sickness, loss of property and friends, dishonor, and persecution; still we all face them. At times it seems like we haven’t the strength to bear up under the load. We can’t make it another step of the way. Yet, the Lord delivers us from all these afflictions. He never allows anything to come upon greater than we can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13). With the burden He gives the strength to endure which comes to us through His life-giving Word and Sacrament. Here He gives us the strength to do all through Him. Even when our vision is blurred to His delivering hand, we know that He is working all things for our good because we are His chosen in Christ.

יִצִּילֵנוּ is hiphil imperfect 3 masc. sing. of נָצַל “to deliver.” This verb is a frequentative imperfect showing repetitive action. The Lord continually delivers us or does it again and again. When the perfect form of this verb occurred in verse 17, it implied completed action rather than continual action.

Verse 20 *“He keeps all his bones, from them not one is broken.”*

The subject of the verse is obviously the Lord, as the text of the Septuagint indicates. The bones here refer to the whole body as in Psalm 32:3. The Lord's protecting of our bones so that none are broken is really a poetic way of saying "from all our afflictions He continually delivers us."

The main question concerning the Messianic interpretation of this text comes to the fore in this verse. Is this verse a directly Messianic prophecy fulfilled in John 19:36, "For these things came to pass, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, not a bone of Him shall be broken?" (NASB). A number of scholars including Lenksi and Lauterbach in *The Crucial Hours* feel there is no connection between the John passage and this Psalm. They believe that John is referring only to Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12. Comparing the John passage with Psalm 34:20, Exodus 12:46, and Numbers 9:12 in the Septuagint, it is seen that all these passages are quite similar.

Psalm 34:20— κύριος φυλάσσει πάντα τὰ ὀστᾶ αὐτῶν ἐν ἑξ αὐτῶν οὐ συντριβήσεται³

John 19:36— ὅστοῦν οὐ συντριβήσεται αὐτοῦ.

Exodus 12:46— καὶ ὅστοῦν οὐ συντρίψετε ἀπ' αὐτοῦ

Numbers 9:12— καὶ ὅστοῦν οὐ συντρίψουσιν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ

Numbers 9:12 and Exodus 12:46 are almost identical, and John follows their word order. Yet, he uses the identical verb form of Psalm 34:20, the 2 future passive of συντρίβω, when he could have used the future active of the other two passages. There is just as close a connection between the John passage and this verse as there is with the other two passages. While John was surely thinking of Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12 for Jesus was the true Passover Lamb, it seems rather difficult to believe that he didn't also have this Psalm in mind. The use of the identical verb form of this passage appears to be more than mere coincidence.

Since there is a connection between John 19:36 and this passage, is this a directly Messianic prophecy? The answer is no for the following reasons:

1. Christ is referred to in verse 7 as מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה "the angel of the Lord." It seems rather strange that the Psalmist would then in this same context use a completely different term to describe Him, "The Righteous One."
2. The singular and the plural of צַדִּיק are used interchangeably in this section as in other Hebrew literature. Therefore, the Psalmist could have said, "He keeps all their bones." The reason he uses the 3 masc. sing. suffix here is because the צַדִּיק to which it refers in verse 20 is singular. This verse speaks of a group, not an individual person.
3. The Psalm refers to the righteous man who is delivered by the Lord so that not one of his bones is broken. In Jesus' case in John 19:36 He was not delivered, but killed by violence. He does not fit the context.

³ This is Psalm 34:21 in the Masoretic Text and Psalm 33:21 in the Septuagint.

4. Usually when the term “righteous” is used in the Psalm, it refers to believers declared “righteous” by faith in Messiah, and not to Messiah specifically as would have to be the case if this were a directly Messianic psalm.

Although this verse is not a directly Messianic prophecy, it does refer to Jesus. The afflictions of the righteous and the protection of the Lord were experienced by the Psalmist in his life, and by all the righteous ones throughout the ages. Since Christ was one of the righteous ones, in fact the Righteous One *par excellence*, this section which finds fulfillment in all believers finds its ultimate fulfillment in our suffering Savior. The divine protection of the righteous ones’ bones is a type or picture of God keeping His Son’s bones on Golgotha. As God saved the bones of David, so He saved the bones of David’s greater Son. The verse then finds fulfillment in Christ because He is one of the righteous ones, and because their protection is a type of God’s protection of Jesus on the cross. For a similar situation see John 13:18 where Jesus uses Psalm 41:9 referring to Judas, but it originally referred to Ahithophel. Here Ahithophel is an Old Testament type of Judas. This section of Scripture may be spoken of as typologically Messianic.

The fact that the Lord keeps our bones shows His merciful protection. It gives the same wonderful comfort as Matthew 10:30, “But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” Yet as verse 20 found its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, it meant infinitely more than this. “The fact the soldiers did not break Jesus’ bones, is a witness to the reconciliation which took place through Christ.” (George Stoeckhardt, *Passionspredigten*, Vol. II, p. 132)

Verse 21 *“Evil will cause the wicked to die and the ones hating the righteous will be punished.”*

תְּמוּתָהּ is the polel imperfect 3 fem. sing. of מוּת meaning “to cause to die.” The wicked die as a result of their own evil. They have no one to blame but themselves. The wicked are the ones who hate the righteous and the Righteous One, Jesus Christ. They hate the righteous because of their trust in the Savior. This irrational hate grows from an unbelieving heart and it will result in punishment. This punishment begins already in time and continues to the eternal. This continuing punishment is shown by the use of the imperfect אֲשֶׁם .

Verse 22 *“Yahweh redeems the soul of His servants; and all those who take refuge in Him will not be punished.”*

פִּדְיָהּ is qal active participle of פָּדָה “to redeem.” The meaning is related to the release from debt by payment of a price. While it often means deliverance, it is always deliverance at a cost. The Lord redeems us by paying our great debt of iniquity. The payment was accomplished in full on Calvary where He offered up His body and blood as the very ransom money to free us from the power of sin, death, and the devil. This concept of being ransomed with a price is found in the related Ugaritic word. “The verb PDY occurs in UT, 1006:2.12, a juridical text which states that a certain EWRKL emancipated a family of seven by paying a hundred shekels of silver to the citizens of Beirut” (Mitchell Dahood, *The Anchor Bible Psalm 1-50*, p. 207).

Those taking refuge in the Lord are those who trust in the Lord’s redemption. In the stormy blast of this life they find a hiding place and shelter in the Lord. Because Jesus bore their sin, the guilt of their sin is not imputed to them and they are not condemned to everlasting punishment. With their sins imputed to Jesus and His righteousness imputed to them, they are safe in the Last Judgment, heirs of heaven. Thus, we have comfort in this life and hope for the

life to come.

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