

Father, Why Have You Forsaken Me (Mat. 27.46)?

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Introduction

Today our focal point of communion remembering is the fourth saying of Jesus from the cross. The first three are the prayer for forgiveness (Lk. 23.34), the "Amen" to the thief on the cross (Lk. 23.42-43) and the word to Mary about crucifixion love (Jn. 19.25-26). The fourth saying is the mystery loaded question, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mat. 27.46; Mk. 15.33; this is the only saying recorded by Matthew and Mark and it is not found in the other Gospels). This is truly a profound passage of Scripture. It is unique within the biblical record and among the sayings from the cross. It is difficult to get our arms around this saying. The words virtually leap from the page before we can absorb them into our thoughts. Consider how the following words jump out at us in quick succession causing us first to stretch our minds and then to humble our hearts.

- Jesus is there *in darkness*.
- On the cross, *Jesus* is forsaken, "why have you forsaken *me*?"
- There on the cross, He is *forsaken*.
- *God* forsakes Jesus: *My God, you* have forsaken me.
- Although forsaken by God, Jesus still *prays* to God.
- In the darkness, He clings to His Father addressing Him as *My God*."
- Jesus is emphatic in His address to God: *'My God, My God.'*
- His prayer is a question, "*why have you forsaken me?*"
- The question begins with the very perplexing *why*.

For me these words are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that are profoundly difficult to assemble. Reading the passage is like looking at the picture on the cover of the box containing the pieces; I see the picture as it were when I hear Jesus say, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Then when I meditate on the passage, it is like looking at the pieces in a jumble and wondering if I can put them together in a meaningful way. Can I assemble them to reflect properly the picture on the cover of the box? Can I preach a sermon on this text that even gets close to what such a sermon ought to be? The answer is "probably not" but I should put forth a good solid effort.

We can try to consolidate the pieces of the puzzle into an outline, but it is hard to do. Perhaps a good way to outline this profound question is by some questions of our own. We have two main ones. What does it mean for Jesus to be forsaken? Why did Jesus ask "why"?

1A. What does it mean for Jesus to be forsaken?

Let me answer this question concisely and then let me try to explain the answer. In a word, for Jesus to be

forsaken means that God left Him alone in hell.

We have to weigh the fact carefully that Jesus spoke these words from the cross and at the end of a distinct experience in His suffering. If we compare accounts, it is clear that Jesus uttered the first three sayings at the beginning of His time on the cross. Then darkness covered the land for three hours (Mat. 27.45, from noon to 3 pm) and at the end of this time, Jesus asked the question we are now pondering (27.46a,"**and about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice saying ...**").

Jesus was forsaken. That fact is a clear presupposition within the question. We may speculate about how Jesus felt, but clearly, He does not wonder why he has a feeling of forsakenness. What we get from the question is the definite implication that forsakenness is a reality. Whatever His feelings may have been, the reality of being forsaken caused Him to cry out in a loud voice with this fourth word from the cross.

He was alone, God-forsaken. This is remarkable in light of what Jesus said to the disciples shortly before His arrest, **Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me (Jn 16.32)**. What hour is coming? It is the hour of trouble (Jn. 12.27a: **Now is my soul troubled and what shall I say?**). He recoiled from this hour (v.27b, **Father, save me from this hour!**), but He devoted Himself to God's glory in it (v. 27c, **Father, glorify your name**). Thus, when Jesus tells the disciples that they will leave Him alone, He is referring to the crucifixion and we get the impression that when everyone on earth forsakes Him, the Father will be with Him. However, that is not what happened. When His closest disciples forsook Jesus, His Father in fact forsook him as well:

Many hands were raised to wound Him and none would interpose to save, But the deepest stroke that pierced Him was the stroke that justice gave

The stroke that justice gave was the piercing reality of forsakenness, of being alone, and of being God-forsaken. The deepest stroke was the stroke that God in justice gave.

In other words, God left Jesus alone in the darkness. What do we learn from the fact that Jesus experienced God-forsakenness alone *in the darkness* on the cross? The record is so brief and the events unfold to the reader so quickly that at first glance we easily miss the impact of the darkness. However, on reflection, it is evident that the three hours of darkness are unique.

Unquestionably, it is a darkness over the land that occurred by divine intervention. Therefore, we have to view the darkness as a symbol or better as a form of speech. If we consider the sunshine at high noon as a form of speech (and we should), we hear God's word of love to the just and the unjust alike **Mat. 5.45. "Your Father...makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good"** in token of His love, the implication of v. 48). Jesus suffered on the cross in darkness without Gods word of love. He did not have what even evil and unjust people have, the sunshine at high noon.

"And on that day," declares the Lord GOD, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. ¹⁰ I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on every waist and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day (Amos 8.9-10).

What word does Israel's ultimate "only son" have from God? He has the word of severe judgment that goes with wrath and fierce anger:

Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the

land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. ¹⁰ For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light (Isa. 13.9-10).

Darkness sends a message, however, it is not one of communication here, but of excommunication. Jesus was excommunicated. God exiled Him from Jerusalem to a place of dying and death outside the gates of the city walls. He was outside of all gates of access to fellowship with God. He was outside of all the gates of Jerusalem, of the land of Israel, of the earth, and of heaven. Going into the darkness was a descent into hell. In other words, for Jesus to be forsaken means that God left Him alone in hell.

That is the deepest depth of suffering on the cross. That is what Jesus addresses when the darkness is about to end. It is not "why this pain?" but "why have you forsaken me?" The pain of hell flows out of and results from being God-forsaken. Most assuredly, for Jesus to be God-forsaken means that God cast Him into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (cf. Mat. 25.30). It is no wonder that Jesus cried out with a loud voice there on the cross (Mat. 27. 46a). It is no wonder that He in effect repeated His question twice (with the Aramaic, repeated in effect four times):

**My God, why have
you forsaken me?**

**My God, why have
you forsaken me?**

In summary and feebly, we can answer the first question, "what does it mean to say that Jesus was forsaken?" It means that His Father left Him alone in order for Him to endure the pain of hell in full measure. It means that Jesus drank every drop of the bitter cup of the wrath of God. This leads us immediately to the second question: "why did Jesus ask "why"?"

2A. Why did Jesus ask "why"?

We made the claim earlier that it is no wonder that Jesus cried out with a loud voice to ask why the Father had forsaken Him. Now, however, we must take some of that claim back. Upon further reflection, we have to wonder why Jesus would ask why.

Let me answer this question concisely and then let me try to explain the answer. In a word, Jesus asked the why question for Himself and for us. He asked the question for Himself because He could not understand what happened and He asked the question for us so that we could understand what happened. It is with caution that I say that He asked this question so that *we could* understand what *He could not* understand. Both of these points need qualification and clarification. We are trying to comprehend the incomprehensible. We are seeking to know the unknowable. We are attempting to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge (Eph. 3.18-19). We are seeking to measure the immeasurably great power that worked on our behalf (Eph. 1.18-19). In other words, we have the threads of paradox in front of us and therefore we are responsible to exercise great care and diligence to bring our thoughts captive to Christ in humble submission. Logic and reason will soon fail us; we must submit ourselves to God. We must submit our thoughts, reasoning, emotions, and ourselves entirely to the word of God. We must exercise great care and diligence.

1B. He asked the "why" question for Himself

The question arose from the darkness. This is a voice from below, a voice reaching up to heaven from hell. How can this be? Can we say that He actually did not understand what was going on there in the darkness? We want to cite all the passages in which Jesus foretold His coming death. Repeatedly, He told His disciples that the Son of man will be delivered into the hands of sinners for crucifixion! **You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified" (Mat. 26.2).** That is but one of many similar passages (Mat. 17.22-23; 20.18-19). The Lord recoiled from the final hour but He set His head like a flint to face it (Jn. 12:24-28). To go to the cross was the purpose for which Jesus came into the world. Therefore, we are prone to say, "Surely He knows why He was cut off, exiled, and excommunicated by God the Father."

Because of these things, some interpreters seek to blunt the point and dull the edge of the fourth saying. Some suggest that Jesus is questioning the length of the time in the darkness; He knows why God-forsakenness is a fact but questions the delay of God's answer. The basis for this view is Psalm 22.2 **My God I cry...but you do not answer**). The fourth word of Jesus is a quotation of Psalm 22.1 **My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?**). Therefore, the thought is that we can avoid the factual problem by shifting attention to a temporal problem (fact versus delay). However, on either view, the real problem is that Jesus does not know or understand something.

We are back where we started and we should find our "answer" in the mystery of the person of Christ who is both God and man with two natures. Being fully human, Jesus grew in knowledge before God and man (Lk. 2.40, 52) and He learned obedience through suffering (Heb. 5.8). To put it another way, we have to recognize that according to His human nature, Jesus could not immediately understand what was happening to Him when He was alone in the darkness and forsakenness of hell. It pleased the Lord to crush Him and when God crushed Him under the milestone of fierce wrath, the understanding of Jesus in His true humanity was ground into fine powder. At the center of His suffering was His God-forsakenness and at the center of His God-forsakenness was the fact that He no longer had a hold on the reason why.

However, He not only seeks to find an answer but He seeks His answer from His God. He reaches up His hand from hell, and though God-forsaken, He reaches up for the Father's hand. He is beaten down, but not destroyed. He does not understand but He will understand shortly when the sun loses its veil and radiates its glory on His face. God withdrew the darkness. Jesus learned obedience through suffering in the darkness that caused a darkened understanding, but He learned because He humbled Himself unto death, even death on a cross!

2B. He asked the "why" question for us

The double question (**My God why...my God why?**) is for our ears. We have to ask this question repeatedly. Why did God forsake Jesus, excommunicate Him, cut Him off from the land of the living, and cast Him into outer darkness? Why do we have the fact of the cross? Why does Jesus go through this abandonment? Why does He suffer so much in travail of soul that is beyond our comprehension?

Of course, our answer is readily at hand. This is the easy answer to formulate. He suffered God-forsakenness in order to be our redeemer: **"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk. 10.45).** He endured our punishment; He suffered in our place: **Mine, mine the transgression but thine, O Lord, the awful pain.** He was bruised for our iniquities. He bore our sins in His own

body on the tree. He paid the infinite price. Justice was executed so that God may be both just and the justifier of those who trust in the risen Lord Jesus. He asked why (let us know that He asked why) so that we could know why He went through this valley of the shadow of death: for us, to save us.

Conclusion: what can we say to these things?

Ultimately, we must fall on our faces at the feet of the Lord Jesus acknowledging that no one knows the Son but the Father. We must say that the knowledge of the Lord Jesus is "too wonderful for me, it is high and I cannot attain unto it" (Ps. 139). We must bow at His feet in worship because the glory of God shines on His face.

Therefore, we must all say in very personal terms at least the following three things as we come to partake of the bread and wine that represents the body and blood of Christ:

- 1) I definitely need Him. I need His descent into hell so that I may ascend to heaven. God exiled Him outside of all gates so that He might become the gate of heaven *for us*.
- 2) I own Him as my prophet, priest and king. I must learn from Him, cling to Him, and serve Him with all my might.
- 3) Finally, I must own His people as my family as the new covenant community that He purchased in exile (cf. Ps. 22.22).

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities (Isa. 53.10-11).

Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen