

Matthew 27:45-49
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Hampton Baptist
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The Seven Last Words of Christ Series

"My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?"

This sermon is fourth in the series, yet it is the only sentence from the cross recorded in Matthew or Mark. Both Luke and John record three sayings each. The first three sayings from the cross showed Christ's care for others. He prayed that God would forgive those who were crucifying him; he offered an eternal reward to the penitent thief and he then took responsibility for the care of his mother after his death. The first statement shouldn't surprise us because Jesus taught forgiveness. Nor should we be surprised at his interaction with the thief on the cross; after all, Jesus came to earth to die so that those who trust in him might be with him in heaven. When Jesus spoke to Mary and John, his words don't surprise us, because Jesus was taught to honor his father and mother, one of the Ten Commandments.

The first three sayings from the cross shouldn't *surprise* us. This fourth statement from the cross is mysterious and raises questions that many of us do not like to consider. Let's take a closer look at Jesus' words, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

As I read the statement this week, I was reminded of the context. I remembered the feelings of abandonment that Jesus was experiencing while on the cross. Many had told him that they would be there for him until the end. Some, less than 24 hours earlier, had mentioned that they would go all the way with Jesus, even *die* with him. Now, those folks had left him, deserted him, abandoned him. At the foot of the cross were four women, three of whom were named Mary and the apostle John. Certainly it was the *darkest* time of the New Testament, for now Jesus even felt abandoned by God. The darkness was *figurative*, but it was also *literal*. Matthew and Mark recorded that darkness covered the land from the sixth hour until the ninth hour; for us that means from noon-3:00 p.m. Jesus had already hung on the cross for three hours. He was nailed to the cross at 9:00 a.m.; three hours of daylight passed with Jesus hanging between heaven and earth. Three hours elapsed as pilgrims passed these crosses coming to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. Three hours were long enough for Jesus to be seen as a spectacle. The pain was more than physical. His emotional and spiritual states were also maimed. And after three hours of utter humiliation and unexplainable anguish, darkness covered the land.

Generally the brightest time of the day is at noon when the sun is directly over our heads, but on that day, it became dark at noon. At one time I wondered if an eclipse could have caused the darkness, but my research nullified that claim. Because the Jews used lunar months, each month began with a new moon. Moreover, since Passover came during the middle of the month, the moon necessarily was full, thus on the opposite side of the earth from the sun. (Fred D. Howard. Bible Book Study Commentary vol. 10 no. 2. Nashville: Convention Press. 1988, p. 126) When Christ, the Light of the World, was dying, the world was devoid of light. And then, another three hours passed.

Darkness covered the earth at noon and Jesus did not utter his dejected cry until almost 3:00. In darkness, the world watched Jesus die. The darkness was mystifying, even frightening. The soldiers were gambling for Jesus' clothes; people, even the religious leaders, were hurling insults at Jesus, and off to the side four women and one man wept and waited for the inevitable.

And then the darkness fell over the land, like an unexpected covering shielding the world from God's presence and God's sight.

Ever had that kind of experience? Maybe it was night already; maybe darkness had already visited and you were wondering *if* it would end, *when* it would end, and *why* it had visited you in the first place. Ever felt like God was kept from *seeing* you, that God was behind a dark curtain unable to see the *real* events of the human story? If so, maybe you too have cried out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Maybe you too have screamed from disgust at your life scenario, cursed the reality in which you lived, ached for some meaning in an otherwise hopeless existence. I think that this is what Jesus was experiencing. He was the *Chosen One*; he had asked God in the Garden of Gethsemane if at all possible to allow the cup to pass from him. He had wondered if there was another way; yet he had also come to a real peace about his mission and purpose. In his earlier statements from the cross, Jesus was true to his character. But now, almost six hours after he had been nailed to the cross, his agony is verbalized. For three hours, he had wondered in the darkness, maybe praying silently for the end to come soon. And in the darkness, in excruciating pain and utter hopelessness, Jesus cried out in pain to a God who must have forgotten.

The darkness was not coincidental. Being in pain for three hours had left Jesus with a question. He couldn't see the heavens; the darkness had enveloped not only his life, but seemingly had swallowed the cosmos, the world. And for three hours, there was no signal otherwise. People were wondering what was happening. Jesus was not alone in not knowing. The darkness was unaccountable. He asked why God had forgotten him.

Some nights, we may have no signal that life is going to get any better. Some nights, we may roll in the darkness, wondering if there is a God who cares. Some nights we may long for the dawn only to be reminded that the dawn is so far away, that the light, although hoped for, is still unseen.

Biblical commentator William Barclay wrote, "Jesus would not be Jesus unless he had plumbed the uttermost depths of human experience. In human experience, as life goes on and as bitter tragedy enters into it, there come times when we feel that God has forgotten us; when we are immersed in a situation beyond our understanding and feel devoid even of God. It seems to me that is what happened to Jesus here. Here we see Jesus plumbing the uttermost depths of the human situation, so that there might be no place that we might go where he has not been before." (William Barclay. The Gospel of Matthew vol. 2. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1975. p. 369)

Does God ever forsake *us*? I find much comfort in the phrase, "God will never leave us or forsake us." But there are times when some have wondered if God had left them. "When it rains, it pours." "Could it get any worse than this?" "Why this, now?" "Haven't I already suffered enough?" "I know the Bible says God will not put anymore on us than we can stand, so when will the bad stuff stop happening?"

These are times when one may wonder if God has forsaken *us*; these times are a fraction of the pain and anguish that Jesus was experiencing in the darkness of the cross with the weight of humanity's sin on his shoulders.

For Jesus to have yelled in a loud voice signified that he still had some energy. To yell, he would have had to fix his feet on the saddle of the cross, that piece of wood on the vertical beam, and then boost himself up to inhale enough air to project his cry. In his anguish-filled voice, he uttered a statement that Matthew and Mark recorded in his native tongue. The English translations still utilize the language that Jesus spoke.

“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Above his head was written the charge against him, “This is the King of the Jews.” This religious leader was now seemingly verbally questioning the existence of God. Those who were watching, especially the skeptics, probably felt justified upon hearing Jesus’ cry. They could feel vindicated because they perceived that this *holy* man was dying without the rescue of the God he supposedly had been serving.

But what many did not realize was that Jesus’ words from the cross were quoted from Psalm 22, as read in our Call to Worship. That Psalm, written by David, referenced a person who was forsaken and beleaguered yet had unshaken confidence in God. The psalm first pictured an individual person as suffering alone. This is followed by praise to God for his act of deliverance for all humanity and for all time. It is a song in praise of the entrance of the Kingdom of God in a mighty act of deliverance. The Psalm is a cry of despair that ends on a triumphant note, and this may be a clue to its meaning for Jesus. (Frank Stagg. Broadman Bible Commentary Matthew-Mark vol. 8. Nashville: Broadman Press. 1969 p.245-6)

The end was in sight. The mission of Jesus was to give his life as the supreme act of love. Although the land was covered in darkness, there was light at the end of the tunnel. The onlookers confused Jesus’ cry as a plea for Elijah; they may have misunderstood Jesus’ *call* for God with the *name* of Elijah. A Hebrew word for God, Eli, could have easily been confused with Elias, the Greek form of the name Elijah. Yet even in the darkness, some still continued to mock Jesus by saying, “Let’s see if Elijah will come and save him.” Right up to the end, some were still belittling this crucified King. The story would be tragic for us if that was the end. But this tragedy does not end on an agonizing note.

Years ago a tornado struck the prairies of Minnesota, killing many, injuring hundreds and almost demolishing the town of Rochester. An elderly doctor and his two sons worked for days aiding the stricken, bandaging wounds, and setting broken limbs. Their heroic work did not go unnoticed. Financial backing was offered for a large hospital, provided the doctor and his sons took charge. They agreed, founding in 1889 a clinic which soon attracted wide attention. For years from fifteen to twenty operations were performed *daily*. People came from all walks of life to the 'Mayo Brothers' Clinic. When the tornado struck, people reacted, "God has forgotten!" Yet blessing came out of disaster, and today the prairie city is known around the world and has brought blessing to uncounted millions. What seemed to be a time of anguish and travail resulted in unimaginable blessing and victory.

In his last few minutes, Jesus cried loudly, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” It must have been the lowest point of his human existence. Yet the time of anguish and travail resulted in unimaginable blessing and victory. God was never more nearer to earth than at that Judean hillside called Golgotha as Jesus gave himself in full obedience to God. In reality, God had not left Jesus; God was right there. That is why even nature itself was draped in black, which is the color for the grieving. Victory did come, not immediately, but on Easter Sunday morning. Jesus did die on that cross, yet he also rose from the dead.

Jesus passed through the uttermost abyss, and then the light broke. If we too cling to God, even when there seems to be no God, desperately and invincibly clutching the remnants of our faith, quite certainly the dawn will break, and we will persevere.

The victor is the person who refuses to believe that God has forgotten, even when every circumstance is convincing otherwise. The victor is the person who will never let go of his/her faith, even when the *feeling* is gone. The victor is the person who has been beaten to the depths, who has plumbed the bottomless crevice, who has lost all hope, yet still holds on to God, for that is what Jesus did. (Barclay, p. 370)

When have you felt abandoned by those who love you or felt deserted even by God? How have you responded to God at the low point in your life: disbelief? Anger? Tears? Woe is me? Faith in spite of a bleak outlook? At such times, does it help to know that Jesus experienced despair and felt the same way?

Let's be thankful that we serve a God who *has* been there; we will not experience any heartache greater than what Jesus experienced on the cross. Let's be thankful that there is never a time nor circumstance when we are separated from God's love and God's presence. Let's be thankful that we serve a God who is stronger than even death, and can bring good out of *all* circumstances. During those long and sleepless nights, those gray and depressing days, know that God cares for you, that God loves you, and that God will never leave you nor forsake you.