

Why Forsaken? • Matthew 27:46

Let's look at Matthew 27:45-50.

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land.

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."

Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

That was the darkest moment in all of history. Even though the noonday sun should have been shining, it had turned black.

Jesus was unlike many crucified men. Many men, when they were crucified, became raving lunatics, completely insane, completely out of touch with anything that would be close to normal behavior. They would scream and they would swear. Every precious breath that they had they would use to shout out some expletive as they sought to express their agony, which perhaps they themselves did not even understand.

For those six hours when Jesus Christ was on the cross, he was amazingly silent. He spoke relatively seldom. Once he spoke to ask God to forgive those who crucified him. Once again he spoke to guarantee salvation to the man who was on the next cross. Once he spoke to assure the continued care of his mother.

And here a fourth time, he breaks the silence, and this becomes the centerpiece of the seven last words on the cross. This time we are told that Jesus shattered the silence with a loud voice. The implication seems to be that the other times he spoke normally or perhaps softly, but not this time. This time he shouted it out, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

They were stunning words. They were, in fact, the actual words that Jesus spoke. Unlike most of the other words Jesus said that are recorded in the

gospels, these are not translated. Keep in mind that Jesus' native tongue was Aramaic and that the New Testament was written primarily in Greek, and it's been translated into English. But here the words are actually recorded in their original Aramaic.

Matthew, writing now years after he actually heard of those events and spoke to the eyewitnesses who were there and heard what Jesus had to say, was apparently still stunned by what Jesus had to say. So much so that Matthew the historian was reluctant to even attempt to translate those words without first giving them exactly as Jesus first spoke them. That's because, without a doubt, this had to be the somberest statement in all the Bible's 66 books.

It is the only recorded question that Jesus ever asked of God the Father, and it was spoken with a volume and a violence that cannot be adequately imitated by a preacher or by an actor. In fact, I feel somewhat uncomfortable even reading it. I have a sense that says that when he spoke loudly I ought to speak loudly. But every time I ever publicly read this scripture, I feel that I am treading someplace where maybe I don't really belong, that I'm saying words that don't really have any business being spoken because there is no adequate way to say the

words as they ought to be said. It seems almost sacrilegious to talk about them.

In the old days, writers used to refer to these words of Jesus as

the cry of a derelict. A derelict is someone or something that has been completely abandoned. We typically use the word to refer to someone who is on skid row, someone who really is the outcast of society and who doesn't any longer belong to anyone at all. A derelict.

But if you look up the dictionary definition of a derelict, you may be surprised to find out that one of its original uses in our English language was in reference to a ship. A derelict ship was one that was somewhere out in the sea lanes. But it was a ship without a crew and without a cargo and without a destination and without anyone manning the rudder or the sails. It was a ship everyone - owner and crew and captain alike - had abandoned. It just didn't

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belong to anyone at all. Who could ever have imagined that 'derelict' or 'cry of dereliction' would be used to describe the Son of God himself? Whoever could have imagined the circumstances that could have been created for him to cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In a sense I feel as if these are hard words to actually get to the center of all that they mean. They are, in a sense, a combination of heaven and hell. Heaven by definition is the presence of God and hell by definition is the absence of God. And so Jesus says, "My God, my God" - those are words of heaven - "why have you forsaken me?" - and those are the words of hell.

Perhaps as stunning as the words that Jesus spoke is the silence that followed them, because Jesus heard no answer from God the Father. At least there is none recorded.

Let us look for a moment at Psalm 22, words that Jesus perhaps here was directly quoting: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? Oh, my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, and by night, and am not silent."

I'm not sure at what points we can identify with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, but doesn't it seem to you that this is at least one point at which we can identify because who among us has not at some time cried out to God that question: "Why? In fact, maybe we've shouted it out and gotten no answer or the only answer has been the answer of silence. We've shouted out, "God why am I so lonely?" "God, why has everything gone wrong?" "God, why can't I find a job?" or "Why am I sick?" or "Why must I die?" "Why a divorce?" "Why am I single?" or "Why am I childless?" Why God? Why? Why? Why? Why to all of the questions of the agonies of life that we experience, and after we've shouted it out, we wait for an answer, and the answer is silence.

Or perhaps there is an answer in the silence. Perhaps there is an answer even in the question. Jesus began, "My God, my God..." Maybe that's the answer. Maybe God himself is the answer to the unanswerable questions of life.

Or perhaps Jesus knew the answer before he asked the question, as we oft times know the answer before we ask our 'why' questions to God. And so, in truth, there is no audible answer needed. Or maybe the answer was one that was written in the

skies when the darkness split apart and the light began to shine through again.

You may sense that I am struggling with how to get at the heart of what this is all about, that I'm not quite sure how to describe, how to depict, how to communicate what was here happening when Jesus spoke this fourth word from the cross. Maybe you feel a little uncomfortable that I have to struggle this way with it, but you're right - not because I haven't tried to get at the heart of it, but because I think the heart of it is beyond human comprehension.

I can identify with Martin Luther who took this text from Matthew 27 and read it and re-read it, who studied it and meditated on it over and over and over again, these stunning words, the somber words of the dying Christ. His biographers say that Luther spent an extended period of time with these words, time during which he ate nothing at all, time when he was uninterrupted, time when he sat almost trance-like in a chair, wide awake, but motionless. He tried his best to grasp what it was all about, to somehow put down on paper or somehow speak from the pulpit what Jesus here was saying and what it meant for us. Finally, Luther's biographers say, he stood to his feet and he himself cried out. And Luther said, "God forsaken of God? Who can understand it?"

Indeed, who can understand it? They are stunning words. "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But far more than being stunning words is the even more somber truth of the dreadful reality of which they spoke. What actually happened at that moment? There are some who say God did not forsake Jesus; he couldn't have. God did not forsake Jesus, but Jesus, rather, was all caught up in the terrible anguish of what crucifixion is all about. Jesus was hallucinating. Jesus was dying of blood loss, of suffering and pain, of thirst, and he only thought, he only sensed, he only felt that God was forsaking him.

Then there are those who seek to be more precise theologically and more logical. They say, actually, there is a trinity - a trinity of Father and Son and of Holy Spirit - and that they are one God, and it is simply by definition impossible for one member of the Trinity to forsake another member of the Trinity. The Father cannot forsake the Son, nor can the Son forsake the Spirit, nor the Spirit forsake the

Father. It's just impossible, it can't happen. And if, theoretically, somehow it could happen, since God is at the very center of all that the universe is, the universe itself would fly apart, and if it happened, we wouldn't know what happened because that would bring disaster to us all.

Well, what did happen? Let me try, at least, to explain. It is true that God is a trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and those who have been very careful to define exactly what that means, as best they can in terms of the Bible, have taught that that trinity is one essence. There is the person of the Father and the person of the Son and the person of the Holy Spirit. Three persons, but they share one 'godness', one 'godhood'. They are all made of the same of whatever makes God God, and they are indivisibly God. It is, in truth, impossible to separate one from the other; it simply cannot be done. You cannot have God abandon God. It's as impossible as it would be for your skeleton to abandon your body. It's a contradiction of terms. Your body isn't your body without your skeleton. They belong together.

There is a chaos that just cannot be defined, cannot make sense. But that is not to minimize what here happened in the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. What it was, somehow, was an awful and a terrible break in fellowship. That's what happened at that one terrible dark moment in history.

It would be good if we could come up with some analogy, some illustration, some comparison to our experience, but frankly, our experience is so distant from God's that no illustration, no analogy is adequate.

Maybe we could make some kind of a crude comparison to the relationship between a human father and a human son. Maybe we could think of a day when they have a break in fellowship, when one abandons the other, when they are no longer on speaking terms, when communication is completely shot. But we know that with a father and a son, even if they do not speak, and even if they do not see each other, and even if there is a cessation, a breaking of fellowship, there is absolutely nothing that one or the other can do to stop being the father or the son of the other person. It is an essential rela-

tionship that cannot be altered.

So what happened then? Somehow, in a mystery beyond the description of human terms, God the Father turned his back on Jesus Christ his son. He did not break the essential relationship, but broke the fellowship of communication that they had enjoyed together for all of eternity.

Why? Why would he do that? Actually, we end up asking the very same question that Jesus asked. Why?

The Bible says in Isaiah 59:2, "But your iniquities have separated you from your God." That's what sin does, that's what iniquities are all about. They split people apart from a holy God.

But Jesus had no iniquities! Ah, that's true enough. He had no iniquities of his own, but the Bible teaches us in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that at that very moment he was made to be sin for us. So at

that point in time in history, Jesus Christ took upon himself our sin! And as he took upon himself our sin, God the Father could no longer have that previous fellowship. He had to have a separation; he had to turn his back. He had to

break the fellowship with his son because Jesus took upon him our iniquity, our lies, our hatred, our sins, our gossip, our stealing, our adultery, our selfishness, our unkindness, our transgressions, and when that happened, God turned his back.

Literally, the word forsaken means a withdrawal of aid, no more help. While Jesus hung there on the cross, God withdrew the help of the Holy Spirit. God withdrew the comfort, the rescue of angels, so there was no comfort, no angels, no strength. Now, then, we begin to understand, at least enough to talk about it, that what happened there was that Jesus was abandoned and left alone. He had to suffer all the consequences of our human sin by himself, no assistance, no encouragement, no comfort, no help, and it was hell. Hell, the absence of God. That is precisely what Jesus there experienced. It would seem to me that for someone who has never known God, that hell would be bad enough. But imagine how much worse hell must be for one who has always known God. And Jesus Christ, God's son, had always known him. And then, for that time, he was so abandoned, the help was so removed, that he who

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had never known anything but God knew the hell of no God anymore. It is little wonder that he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" At that point in time, Jesus experienced all the depths of loneliness.

Most of us know a little bit about loneliness. We know that it's hard to be alone. We know that it's difficult to make it without our friends. And some of us have had those days when we had no friends at all, no one upon whom we could depend, no one who really cared what happened to us or where we went or what we did. We understand a little bit of what it means to be forsaken. And Jesus knew that too, in fact, far more than we, for he—there—the Son of God, not only bore our sin, but was left alone to do it.

It seems to me that it was with that memory fresh in his mind that Jesus insisted that some of his words be recorded out of all of the words that he spoke. It was remembering the pain of that loneliness that caused him to have this same author, Matthew, tell us and tell all of his disciples, "Surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Jesus who had been so desperately and pathetically lonely wanted to make sure that we as his followers, as Christians, would never experience what he experienced, that we would never have to be as lonely as he was lonely, as forsaken as he was forsaken.

It was with that in mind that the Apostle Paul wrote some words that I find to be comforting. They are written in 2 Corinthians 4:8-10, and they describe what it's like now to live after the cross, to experience the assurance of the comfort and the presence of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote,

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not indignant; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

It was all planned. It was all predicted, even before the foundation of the earth. It was all laid out that Jesus Christ would do all that for us.

Let's look in the middle of the Bible in the Old Testament book of Isaiah, chapter 53, at the words that predicted what Jesus there would experience. This is what it says:

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

He (Jesus) grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,

yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;

the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Yes, they were somber words that Jesus prayed to God in that question long ago, the only question he ever asked God. And they call us to a question - a simple question, but a question that really has to be answered. Since Jesus Christ had laid upon him my sin and your sin and so suffered hell for us, will you - have you - accepted Jesus Christ as your savior? All his suffering, all his loneliness, all his forsaking is of no practical avail unless, of course, we accept what he has done in our behalf.

Have you? Will you?

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