

Abandonment Issues: Did God the Father Really Forsake Jesus on the Cross?



Today is the Friday before Easter. Known as Good Friday across the world, it is the day on which Jesus of Nazareth was crucified on a cross by Roman centurions and died an agonizing death for the sake of the world.

For Christians, it is a time of great mourning, because this day reminds us that our evil inclinations expressed as sin are so deep, so expansive, that God sent his only Son to carry the burden of those sins for us.

It is also a time of great hope and rejoicing, because Jesus' death and resurrection have purchased for us true freedom from guilt, shame, and captivity.

As I reflect on the events of that first Easter, I am continually brought back to Jesus' final moments on the cross.

The four Gospel accounts of Jesus' death share different aspects of what happened, as they also share different emphases to various audiences.

Mark's Gospel gives us [the following account of Jesus' death](#):

33 At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 34 And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

35 When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah." 36 Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said.

37 With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. 38 The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

I have heard many sermons and lectures about this passage over the years, and am still brought to tears with gratefulness to my Lord and Savior, Jesus, that he endured this shame for me.

Jesus' Cry of Dereliction

In the last few years, I have also become very frustrated by interpretations of this passage that focus on Jesus' words in verse 34: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" These words are famously known as the **cry of dereliction**, and they are the most profoundly important words that Jesus spoke on the cross.

I have heard many interpretations of these words, and many lean towards something like the following. That in Jesus' greatest moment of shame and anguish, as he took the sins of

the whole world upon himself as the sacrificial lamb, that he became so covered over with evil that God the Father could no longer look at his own Son and turned away from him.

If you doubt this interpretation's prevalence, just listen to one of this generation's most prominent praise songs about the passion, *How Deep the Father's Love for Us*, by Stuart Townsend ([listen to it here](#)):

*How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss –
The Father turns His face away,
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory.*

This song will be sung in churches across America on Sunday. It is a beautiful song that seeks to capture the amazing love of God for humanity, even in the midst of our sin. It does an amazing job of this, but the theology is just plain *wrong*, and represents the prevailing view of the cry of dereliction as a cry of Jesus' abandonment on the cross.

What Did Jesus Mean?

It is no surprise to those who read the Bible that Jesus' words were a direct quote from the Old Testament, Psalm 22 to be precise. Jesus was counting on his followers to understand the reference and, by memory, recall the rest of the passage. *I have included the entire Psalm at the end of this post for your reflection.*

What does surprise me is how so many interpreters of Scripture know this, and yet seem to miss the point of Jesus quoting this Psalm.

The Psalm begins with a cry of anguish asking God why he is so far away, why he hasn't heard the cries of the Psalmist, and

why he hasn't been delivered like Israel was when they put their trust in God.

It goes on to describe the very situation in which Jesus found himself. Being mocked by his persecutors, broken, near death, the Psalmist was mired in hopelessness. Why was God when he needed him the most?

Was God there? Did he really abandon the Psalmist, and what's more, did he really abandon Jesus' on the cross?

Many interpreters would have you believe this is so. What is to be gained from this? Most would say that it shows God's holiness. Because God is holy – completely opposite of evil – that he cannot look upon sin. It is written in our catechisms. It is sung in our songs. It is recited by our children.

But our God is not afraid of evil. He is not concerned that it will affect him. In fact, our God is a God who acts in the midst of great evil and death to bring about holiness and life. If this were not so, how could he become incarnate as a man, live among evil men, and die upon a cross for them?

If God cannot look upon evil, then what hope is there for us while we are mired in our sins?

But, though our songs and sermons would say otherwise, we know from the Bible that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,” demonstrating that God does not turn away from evil. Instead, he *overcomes* it!

The Rest of the Story

But what about the Psalm Jesus quoted? It sure sounds like he is indeed saying that God has abandoned him. Why all the discomfort with that interpretation?

I get frustrated with this because it shows that people have stopped reading before the end. They have missed the rest of

the story.

After agonizing over the present situation in the first half of the poem, and crying out for God's deliverance, the Psalmist abruptly changes course in his narrative. **What began as a cry of dereliction becomes instead a declaration of faith in the mercy and might of the Living God.**

Beginning with verse 22, the Psalm becomes a cry of victory and a promise that God's mercy has prevailed.

*22 I will declare your name to my people;
in the assembly I will praise you.*

*23 You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!*

*24 For he has not despised or scorned
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.*

Look at verse 24. With this shift, we see that the Psalmist's cry of verse 1 has been answered decisively. God has not turned his back on the afflicted Holy One. **He has listened to his cry for help and has vindicated him!**

When Jesus spoke verse one of Psalm 22 from the cross, it was with with the full knowledge that God had heard his cry, the cry of an innocent, and had already acted decisively on his behalf.

With one stroke, the enemies of God had been defeated on the cross; sin and death hold no more dominion over the earth. And as the Psalmist declared all the earth will remember this might act and will turn to the Lord in worship for his great act of love!

Jesus' cry of dereliction is not one of abandonment, but one

of praise! It is the victory shout of God.

Where to from Here?

If God turns his face away from evil, then I am to be pitied, for I am an evil man, deserving of God's judgment and wrath.

But when I read the Psalm to which Jesus directed us on the cross, I am filled with courage and hope and thanksgiving, because it shows me what I already know to be true from Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection.

God is a God who is holy and loving. His holiness does not cause him to look away from me in my greatest hour of need, nor does his love mean that he overlooks my sin and says "don't worry about it".

No, God is both holy and loving – the one does not exist without the other. **In his holiness he cannot overlook evil, and in his love he cannot turn his back on his creation.**

[Tweet ""God is both holy and loving – the one does not exist without the other.""]

And so, in his mightiest act of holy-love, God has stepped into our sinful world, taken the burden upon himself, and come out on top as the Victor over sin and death, through Jesus Christ.

Praise God for his loving kindness!

This is a Good Friday, indeed!

Psalm 22

For the director of music. To the tune of "The Doe of the Morning." A psalm of David.

1My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

*Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?*

*2My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.*

*3Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the one Israel praises.*

*4In you our ancestors put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.*

*5To you they cried out and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.*

*6But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.*

*7All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.*

*8"He trusts in the Lord," they say,
"let the Lord rescue him.*

*Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him."*

*9Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.*

*10From birth I was cast on you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.*

*11Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.*

*12Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.*

*13Roaring lions that tear their prey
open their mouths wide against me.*

*14I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.*

*My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted within me.*

15My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.

16Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.

17All my bones are on display;
people stare and gloat over me.

18They divide my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment.

19But you, Lord, do not be far from me.
You are my strength; come quickly to help me.

20Deliver me from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dogs.

21Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

22I will declare your name to my people;
in the assembly I will praise you.

23You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!

24For he has not despised or scorned
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.

25From you comes the theme of my praise in the great
assembly;

before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows.

26The poor will eat and be satisfied;
those who seek the Lord will praise him—
may your hearts live forever!

27All the ends of the earth
will remember and turn to the Lord,

*and all the families of the nations
will bow down before him,
28for dominion belongs to the Lord
and he rules over the nations.*

*29All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—
those who cannot keep themselves alive.*

*30Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord.*

*31They will proclaim his righteousness,
declaring to a people yet unborn:
He has done it!*