

Why Have You Forsaken Me?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

The Fourth of the Seven Last Words

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Psalm 22:1–5 (NIV)

- ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?
- ² My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.
- ³ Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the one Israel praises.
- ⁴ In you our ancestors put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.
- ⁵ To you they cried out and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

Mark 15:25–36 (NIV)

²⁵ It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶ The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.

²⁷ They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. ^[28] ²⁹ Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰ come down from the cross and save yourself!” ³¹ In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! ³² Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

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.

Forsaken. Abandoned. The Cry of Dereliction. What sort of God is this?

Noon passed and a strange, unnatural darkness has overcome Golgotha and all of Jerusalem. The mid-day light recedes as the darkness pushes its way in. It seems as if the world’s light is being slowly extinguished. And the minutes roll on. For three hours Jesus has hung on the cross, beaten and bleeding, struggling to push himself upward to take each breath.

Another hour passes. The darkness deepens. The minutes roll on. Still another hour. The passing minutes have slowed to an agonizing crawl in the suffocating gloom.

After six hours on the cross Jesus is near death, almost too weak to accomplish the difficult task of breathing. Alone in the darkness, Jesus is overwhelmed with despair. In desperation he screams out¹, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” in his native Aramaic. The Jews standing within earshot recognize these words as the opening verse of Psalm 22, an expression of soul-crushing desolation. The psalmist feels that even God has abandoned him – *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Now, it is Jesus’ prayer, his word of dereliction.²

Merriam-Webster defines “forsake” as “to renounce or turn way from entirely.” To forsake someone in need is to abandon them, to leave them. That is how the psalmist

¹ The Greek word that Mark uses here suggests something akin to a scream.

² This fourth of Jesus’ “last words” is often called the Word of Dereliction, for “dereliction” means “the state of having been abandoned.”

felt. That is how Jesus felt. I'm pretty sure that we've all felt forsaken. Indeed, when we come to this word of dereliction, we are tempted to hurry to Easter, but we need to stand at the foot of the cross for awhile yet.

Forsaken by God?

There are many ways in which we suffer. Some are physical; some are emotional. But I don't know that any are worse than believing that you are absolutely alone – cut-off, abandoned, forsaken by all, forsaken even by God. But what could it mean to say that Jesus is cut-off from God when, in the next moment, we confess him to be the Second Person of the Trinity. Is there any sense to made of this? What can we learn of Jesus, of God, in this cry of dereliction?

Here are some thoughts from Stanley Hauerwas on this. This passage will repay a careful reading.

It is not by accident that the Psalms are for Jews and Christians our prayer book. We pray the Psalms not because they give expression to our religious experience— though they sometimes may do that— but because our lives are given form by praying the Psalms. But in truth only one life, the life of Jesus, has been the perfect prayer the Psalms are meant to form. As those who have been charged to care for Mary, herself a Jew, we cannot be shaped by these words from the cross if we forget they are prayed by the One for whom Israel has longed. Only a people like Israel, a God-possessed people, can know what it might mean to be abandoned by God. This is not a cry of general dereliction; it is the cry of the long-expected Messiah, sacrificed in our stead and thus becoming the end of sacrifice. This cry is but the prismatic exemplification of the love that is God's life. It is the love that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;

⁷rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)

Jesus's being handed over, Jesus's obedience even to the point of death, Jesus's cry of abandonment makes no sense if this is not the outworking of the mystery called Trinity. This is not God becoming what God was not, but rather here we witness what God has always been. Here, as the Second Council of Constantinople put it, "one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh." The Word that was in the beginning, the Word that was with God, the Word through whom all things came into being, the Word that shines in the darkness, the Word that assumed our flesh, suffering even unto death, is God. The cross, this cry of abandonment, is not God becoming something other than God, is not an act of divine self-alienation; instead this is the very character of God's kenosis— complete self-emptying made possible by perfect love. Contrary to those who suggest that only if God is capable of suffering is he capable of love, it is only because God is Trinity— that is, it is only because God is Trinity— that is, it is only because God is perfect self-giving, perfect self-same delight— that he can suffer as one of us.³

Suffering as one of us

I am not sure what to make of Jesus' forsakenness. Was he truly cut off from God, drowning in a dark ocean of sin, as some Christians see it? Was this what Paul meant when he wrote that "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21)? Did God really turn his back on Jesus? But what then does this do to our confession that Jesus was fully and completely God? Doesn't it rip apart Jesus' two natures? Notice that

³ Hauerwas, Stanley (2005-01-01). *Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words* (p. 50). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Jesus is not even speaking of the Father as he often does, but of “God.” Is this merely because Jesus was quoting Psalm 22 or is there a deeper meaning to it?

The questions swirl around this Fourth Word, and I won’t pretend to know the answers. But I do know this, Jesus suffered on that cross. He suffered terrible physical pain. He suffered emotionally. He felt abandoned and cut-off, even from God. He suffered and, in this, he revealed the deepest and most important truth about the nature of God. Such is the nature of true love, God-love.

Thus, the cross must inform all of our wonderings about our own suffering. So often, people want to talk about suffering – their own or others. Where is God they ask? What sort of God would allow such a thing? We are like Gideon. When the angel of the LORD shows up and tells Gideon to stay strong because “The LORD is with you,” Gideon replies, “But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us.” We would ask the same question of that angel.

Too often, we are so desperate for answers that we concoct all sorts of reasons, many of which can be found in some of the explanations offered by Job’s friends when Job is beset by soul-crushing adversity. Terence Fretheim lists a few of these⁴:

- Suffering is the will of God
- Suffering has been sent by God for a purpose
- God could have prevented the suffering but chose not to
- Suffering is specifically allowed by God, at least for a time.
- Suffering is God’s judgment because of sins committed
- Suffering is bad and to be avoided at all costs
- To suffer is to bear the cross

The problem isn’t that these explanations are *all* wrong, but neither are they *all* right. As Fretheim puts it, when we come to the Bible we have to be prepared for nuance. We might like the Bible to set things out in black and white, but the Bible simply doesn’t when it comes to many of the questions we have. The bumper sticker reading “The Bible says it; I believe it” does an injustice to the full glories of the God-breathed Scriptures we have been given. Fretheim again:⁵

Faced with the realities of suffering and evil, Christians can say something, but they cannot say everything or even as much as they might like to say. They cannot “explain” suffering or “resolve” the problem of evil or provide “answers” to these issues or develop an airtight “theodicy.” . . . [However,] the Bible does give its readers some room to speak between silence and “explanation.”

Here’s a few thoughts that might be helpful.

Suffering is a function of human limitations. We break easily. We get lonely and fearful. We are tempted into bad choices. These limitations are not the result of sin but are simply part of how God made us. Jesus was anxious and fearful in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Jesus grieved over Lazarus. And Jesus was without sin. Could Jesus have cut himself using his carpenter tools? Of course. In the Garden of Eden, could Adam have climbed a tree, fallen out, and broken his leg. Sure. The laws of physics operated in the Garden. Indeed, we can bet that “subduing” creation wasn’t any easier back then than it is now. Does our sin increase the suffering? Sure. Adam might have been pushed out of the tree. (I won’t say by whom, but the candidates were limited).

Suffering results from the freedom we are given. As we’ve seen, from the beginning, God pulled humanity into the work of creation. We are to multiply; there is no magic God-wand for making babies; a man and woman must become one flesh. We are to subdue an untamed and often dangerous planet. It is human gardeners who help beautiful flowers to flourish in ways they never could in the wild. How many varieties

⁴From Fretheim’s book, *Creation Untamed*, Baker Academic, 2010.

⁵ *Creation Untamed*, p. 100

of roses have human created? In this wild world, we have been given remarkable freedom to grow and to be challenged. The challenges of this world are often the means of our growth. How many parents believe that the best way to raise loving, responsible, well-adjusted adults is to give them everything they want and remove every obstacle and source of potential pain?

The writer of Ecclesiastes wisely observed, “Again I saw under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all” (9:11). God created a universe into which randomness is woven at every turn. Indeed, at the deepest structures of reality exists a strange, counterintuitive world that seems to be governed by dice as much as by anything. And yet we manage. We still land men on the moon. We still eliminate smallpox. And God is with us in all this.

Finally, suffering also stems from the fact that the LORD God Almighty has chosen to accomplish his purposes through us weak, finite humans. This is the cosmos that God, in his infinite wisdom, *chose* to create. I suppose that God could wave a magic wand and fix all our problems, take away everything that might harm us, but then we would no longer be thinking, loving, free creatures. What is love without the possibility of not loving? Consider those who have suffered the pain of unrequited love . . . for example, God.

Yes, there is mystery in suffering but it isn't all mystery. *And always, we have to bear in mind and heart that God enters into our suffering with us.* This is the cross. It is Jesus who lies at the bottom of the pile of murdered bodies. It is Jesus who is tormented with a body broken by disease and injury. It is Jesus who bears the brunt of human evil. And this Jesus is God, the One to whom every knee will bow.

Far from any sort of remote absentee deity, the *God-Who-Is* has created a cosmos that is ever-changing and ever-challenging. And we proclaim a God who not only suffered and died on the cross, but has always been deeply involved with us and with suffering.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The first question is simple and profound. As you contemplate and reflect on the suffering of Christ, his devotion even to death on a cross, his feelings of abandonment – what do you make of it? What does it mean to you? Where do your thoughts turn?
2. Jesus is forsaken and abandoned. At least, he feels that way. When have you felt abandoned by friends and family? What was it like? Have you ever felt abandoned by God? Conversely, when, if ever, have you ever experienced the intense presence of God?
3. On the one hand, we confess that Jesus is Lord and Savior suffered and died for us all, and with the other hand, we strive to put others before ourselves, living in humility and selflessness. We know that we cannot ignore the demands of the Gospel and still proclaim its truth. Discuss what this holding together of theology and ethics means for our lives as Christians, as we strive to be better disciples. You might make a list of key beliefs and then consider the ethical implications of those beliefs. Or turn it around. Make a list of what we are called to do, and then discuss the theological implications of those practices. Why do we do what we do? Only because Jesus said so? . . . or ought we to look a little deeper.
4. Take a moment to look at the bulleted list of “explanations” of suffering on page two. How many have you heard used? What were the circumstances? How did the explanation strike you at the time? How many have you used yourself? What do you think of the idea that nuance is demanded? Does that seem like a cop-out?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7-8 God suffers with his people. (This is what implied by the Hebrew verbs applied to God).</p>	<p>Tuesday, Isaiah 43:23-25 God is burdened with the sins of his people.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Jeremiah 9:17-19 God mourns and even cries over his people's faithlessness.</p>	<p>Thursday, Philippians 2:5-11 Try memorizing this Christ-hymn. It reveals us the deepest and most important truth of God.</p>
<p>Friday, Romans 8:31-39 Nothing, but nothing, can separate us from the love of God. God never abandons us.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

