

“The Word of Desolation”

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Psalm 22:1-24, Mark 15:33-34

Ps 22:1 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?
 Ps 22:2 O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
 by night, and am not silent.

Ps 22:3 Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
 you are the praise of Israel.
 Ps 22:4 In you our fathers put their trust;
 they trusted and you delivered them.
 Ps 22:5 They cried to you and were saved;
 in you they trusted and were not disappointed.

Ps 22:6 But I am a worm and not a man,
 scorned by men and despised by the people.
 Ps 22:7 All who see me mock me;
 they hurl insults, shaking their heads:
 Ps 22:8 “He trusts in the LORD?
 let the LORD rescue him.
 Let him deliver him,
 since he delights in him.”

Ps 22:9 Yet you brought me out of the womb;
 you made me trust in you
 even at my mother’s breast.
 Ps 22:10 From birth I was cast upon you;
 from my mother’s womb you have been my God.
 Ps 22:11 Do not be far from me,
 for trouble is near
 and there is no one to help.

Ps 22:12 Many bulls surround me;
 strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.
 Ps 22:13 Roaring lions tearing their prey
 open their mouths wide against me.
 Ps 22:14 I am poured out like water,
 and all my bones are out of joint.
 My heart has turned to wax;
 it has melted away within me.
 Ps 22:15 My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
 and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
 you lay me in the dust of death.
 Ps 22:16 Dogs have surrounded me;
 a band of evil men has encircled me,
 they have pierced my hands and my feet.
 Ps 22:17 I can count all my bones;
 people stare and gloat over me.
 Ps 22:18 They divide my garments among them
 and cast lots for my clothing.

Ps 22:19 But you, O LORD, be not far off;
 O my Strength, come quickly to help me.
 Ps 22:20 Deliver my life from the sword,
 my precious life from the power of the dogs.
 Ps 22:21 Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
 save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

Ps 22:22 I will declare your name to my brothers;
 in the congregation I will praise you.
 Ps 22:23 You who fear the LORD, praise him!
 All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
 Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
 Ps 22:24 For he has not despised or disdained
 the suffering of the afflicted one;
 he has not hidden his face from him
 but has listened to his cry for help.

Mk 15:33 At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.
 Mk 15:34 And at 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?"

We come now to the lowest point of Jesus' life. He had been hanging on the cross some three hours, death was very near and darkness covered the earth. And out of the darkness came a piercing cry -- a cry so terrible that both Matthew and Mark give this as the only word spoken by Jesus from the cross.....They are words spoken in Aramaic, quoting the opening lines of Psalm 22. In English: "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!*" Jesus wasn't simply quoting poetry. The words came from the depths of his being; they were words of complete and utter desolation.

"*My God, why have you forsaken me?*" These are difficult words. Can it be so? Did God the Father really forsake his Son on the cross? Is that possible? If God did forsake his Son, then it seems to me we must question the very nature of God. If God forsook his Son, what makes us think God would not also desert plain, ordinary sinners like you and me? Can God be trusted to be there for us at our greatest point of need? These are puzzling words.

One thing is clear: Jesus *felt* forsaken by God. He was certainly acquainted with the experience of forsakenness. Everyone had a habit of abandoning him. The crowds who hailed him king on Palm Sunday quickly deserted him. His own disciples on the night he was arrested "*forsook him and fled.*" Now in his pain and agony it seemed to Jesus that his Father in heaven had too. Everyone else had abandoned him; why not his Heavenly Father? Oh, the awful loneliness of the cross!

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 scorned by men and despised by the people.
 Ps 22:7 All who see me mock me;
 they hurl insults, shaking their heads:
 Ps 22:8 "He trusts in the LORD?
 let the LORD rescue him.
 Let him deliver him,
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Jesus in his humanness is not unlike us. We too feel awfully lonely in moments of extreme suffering. Do we not even feel abandoned by God himself? *"God where are you and how could you let this happen to me....My God why have you forsaken me?"* It's a very human cry. And Jesus was human even if he was also God's Son. Sometimes we forget that.

Could it be that Jesus also felt forsaken by God because of *sin*? Of course, I am not referring to his personal sin – scripture tells us that Jesus himself was sinless - but it was humanity's sin that he was carrying on his shoulders, kind of like Atlas shouldering the world. It's hard for us to understand but the Apostle Paul tells us that Jesus, the innocent sinless one, actually became sin for us. *"For our sake [God] made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"* (2 Corinthians 5:21). On the cross he carried the full weight of our iniquity and took upon himself the punishment we deserved that we might be forgiven of our guilt and find new life. It may very well be that in taking upon himself the sin of the world Jesus felt the separation that sin always brings. Sin separates us from God. Sin prevents us from seeing God; sin blinds. At that moment when Jesus became sin he simply could not see his Father alongside him nor realize his presence. At that moment, Jesus for the first time does not address God as his Father – such was the separation. He felt the forsakenness of that incredible burden of humanity's sin.

But the question remains: did God actually forsake Jesus? Did God the Father turn a blind eye to God's own dying Son at Calvary? I think not. Though Jesus felt God's absence, God the Father was actually closer to him than at any other point of his life.

In a church in Gruyere, Switzerland, there is a large painting over the altar showing Jesus on the cross in all of his suffering. It all looks very dark and foreboding. But upon a closer look one sees in the background God the Father who, reaching from heaven, upholds the cross with his two arms...we find God present at the crucifixion supporting and upholding his Son. Upon even closer examination, God the Father is weeping over his Son.

Did God forsake Jesus on the cross? No, God was there for His Son, supporting him and sharing his sorrow in his dying moment.

And Jesus came to realize that. Yes, for one terrible moment he felt utterly forsaken by God, but in the end he came to put his trust in the God who had never left him.

Jesus on the cross quotes the beginning lines of Psalm 22--words of desolation--*"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me."* But we can imagine that Jesus went on to pray the rest of that psalm which ends on a note of trust and confidence in God:

Ps 22:24 For he has not despised or disdained
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.

In the midst of all the darkness, there is a hint of hope that God in the end will come through.

No, God did not forsake Jesus. God simply is not like that. It just doesn't square with what we know of God, for God is love, and it is of the very nature of love that it never fails. *"I have loved you with an everlasting love"* says God. Love never gives up and never deserts a loved one. *"Love never ends"* says Paul. For God to forsake Jesus would mean that God no longer loved his Son.....But that is not true to God's nature and we know that God's nature does not change. God cannot forsake you and me. God's love never ceases.

Then too, we know that God always keeps his promises. God has never broken one promise. Look through the Bible and you will see God never let one person down. When the three Hebrews - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego - were thrown into the fiery furnace, they were unharmed because there was a fourth man with them.....God never deserts his people even in a fiery furnace of oppression.

Remember these words of God: *"I will never leave you nor forsake you...."* Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God is with us.

But still, even armed with these words and promises, when we or when someone we love suffers we can't help but wonder where God is.

During World War II, just after word had arrived that an only son had been killed in battle, a minister was called to the home of his parents. The father, half in grief and half in rage, blurted out as soon as the minister arrived: *"I want to know, where was God when my son was being killed?"* The minister thought a long time and then replied softly: *"I guess where he was while his Boy was being killed."...*

God knows how we feel; he has been there. He, too, has suffered and cried. He has shared our sorrows. In our moments of grief and agony, God is there, reaching out to us in love even as he was reaching out to his Son on the cross.

It is tremendously comforting to me to know that God did not forsake Jesus on the cross. It keeps my faith in a God whose love will never let me go and assures me that in my darkest hour he will be with me...

Thanks be to God who abides with us always!