

Why Have You Forsaken Me?

The Cross (Part 16)

Mark 15:34 (Mt.27:46) 2/18/2023

In Mark 15:34 Jesus cries out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Did God actually forsake Jesus? If so, what's the answer to Jesus' question? Why? And if you think the answer is obvious, then why does Jesus ask the question? He knew he had to drink this cup, he agonized about it in Gethsemane. So why is he asking this question?

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Mark 15:33 At the sixth hour darkness came upon the whole land until the ninth hour. 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?"

Introduction: Did God Forsake Jesus?

In Mark 15:34 Jesus cries out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Did God actually forsake Jesus? And if so, what's the answer to Jesus' question? Why? And if you think the answer is obvious, then why does Jesus ask the question? He knew he had to drink this cup, he agonized about it in Gethsemane. So why is he asking this question? Did Jesus really believe that the Father had forsaken him? And if so, what does "forsaking" mean, exactly? Was there some kind of rift in the Trinity? And how long did the forsaking last?

Did God Forsake Jesus?

I made an argument in the Q&A last time that God never forsook Jesus on the cross. Now, what you make of that will depend in part on your definition of the word "forsake." If your definition of forsaking is that God turned his face away from Jesus, withdrew his tenderness, cut off access to fellowship with him, withheld all comfort and strengthening, and punished Jesus as if he were furiously angry with him—if that's what you mean by forsaking, then yes, God did forsake Jesus. Because he did all of that.

But there are some other things God did not do. God did not abandon Jesus to the grave. Acts 2:30 David was a prophet and knew that God had promised ...that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. 31 ...he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not forsaken (same word Jesus used when he said "why have you forsaken me) to the grave.

Secondly, the Father didn't abandon Jesus in the sense of rejecting him. God accepted the sacrifice Jesus was offering and was pleased by it.

Third, God was not angry with Jesus. He did treat Jesus *as if* he were angry with him. God was angry with mankind, and he poured out the consequences of that wrath on Jesus. But nowhere does the Bible say God was emotionally angry with his Son. It does say he was

pleased with his Son. And, you could argue, never more pleased than when Jesus gave his life to reconcile the world to God.¹

Fourth, God never became indifferent to Jesus' cries. There was never a moment when God heard Jesus crying out and said, "I don't care. That means nothing to me." God cared—deeply. He didn't let Jesus feel the sensation of being cared for, he didn't offer any expression of that care while Jesus was on the cross, but the Father did care.

So if you agree with those two lists of what God didn't do and what God did do, then you and I are on the same page. You might refer to all of that as God temporarily forsaking Jesus, and I might describe the exact same thing by saying God never abandoned him at all, but made Jesus *feel* abandoned. But regardless of the wording we would use to describe it, we would be in agreement on what actually happened.

However, I do believe there is a bit of a danger in describing it the first way. Here's why: to say God temporarily forsook Jesus might give the impression that whenever times are hard, God has abandoned you and when things are smooth, God came back.

That's how many commentators interpret Psalm 22. Verse 1 says, "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**" And verse 23 says, "**You who fear the Lord, praise him! ...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.**" They see that and say, "Well, obviously, by v.23 his problems had gone away. In v.1 he was having a hard time so God had abandoned him. But then God rescued him and answered his prayers so he started praising God for un-abandoning him."

I don't agree with that interpretation. First of all, there's nothing in the psalm to indicate that David's circumstances changed between section 1 and section 2. Secondly, the argument fails because you can tell just from v.1 that the speaker doesn't really believe God forsook him because he calls him, "My God." He wouldn't be able to refer to God that way if God had truly forsaken him.

Hardship Does not Mean You're Forsaken

And beyond that, that whole way of looking at it contradicts what the rest of the Bible says about how to interpret hardship. That was the philosophy of Job's friends. "Oh, things aren't going well for you Job? Obviously God is mad at you." Then when he gets his health and money back, "Oh, now God is back on your side." They were rebuked by God for that philosophy.

In 2 Corinthians 4 Paul speaks to this directly.

2 Corinthians 4:8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken (same word as Jesus used on the cross); **struck down, but not destroyed.**

Paul was hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. But even while all that was going on, still, he wasn't forsaken or abandoned by God. It wasn't that he was temporarily forsaken and then unforsaken later. The whole point is that he was never forsaken.

¹ On a related point, there's another idea that you frequently hear about the cross that the Bible doesn't say. It's the idea that Jesus suffered the equivalent of all the suffering of all sinners in hell for eternity. That sounds logical, but really that's what it is—human logical reasoning. The Bible never actually says that. The most we can say is this—Jesus suffered enough so that God accepted his sacrifice in place of our eternal suffering.

In Philippians 4, did Paul say, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, pray for relief, and after God brings it, then offer thanksgiving?” No. He said, “In everything, by prayer and petition *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God.” You don’t wait until after God responds. You’re already thankful to God for whatever he’s planning on doing before he does anything. And you’re thankful for whatever he’s accomplishing through the hardship. If you wait until after you get what you want from God to start praising him, you’re living by faith, not sight. You’re using God rather than trusting God. So it’s wrong to assume you’re abandoned by God just because it feels like you’ve been abandoned.

Different for Jesus?

So in Psalm 22 when he shifts from “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” to “Praise God because he has not forsaken me,” what changed wasn’t his circumstances. What changed was his perspective. He went from focusing on how he *felt* to what he *knew*. He felt forsaken, but in his mind he knew that wasn’t the case.

Now, there are some who would come back and say, “Well, maybe that was true for David. But the situation for Jesus on the cross was different. God didn’t forsake David in Psalm 22, but he did forsake Jesus on the cross.

But if that’s the case, then it would be incredibly misleading for Jesus to quote Psalm 22? If he meant something totally different from what David meant, why mislead people by quoting David?

Some of the commentators argue that Jesus only quoted v.1, therefore he didn’t have the rest of the psalm in mind. They say the only part of the psalm that applied to Jesus was v.1, about God abandoning him, not the rest of the psalm. They say, “If we do that, we diminish the intensity of Jesus’ suffering because sections 2 and 3 of the psalm are upbeat and triumphant.”

I strongly disagree with that argument. Our job is not to interpret everything in the way that would mean the maximum possible suffering for Jesus. Our job is to be honest with whatever the text says and let God worry about whether Jesus suffered enough. And if we interpret this passage the same way we interpret all the other times Jesus quotes the Old Testament, we would most definitely consider the whole psalm. Every other time in the book of Mark when Jesus or Mark have quoted the Old Testament, every one has pointed to the whole context surrounding the quoted passage. So if Jesus quoted a verse out of context here it would be extremely out of character for both him and Mark.

Jesus suffered plenty. It’s not a problem for us to think he drew some comfort from God’s promises. The reason sections 2 and 3 of Psalm 22 are triumphant and joyful is because the focus shifts from how things seem to what the Bible says is true about God. For Jesus to shift his attention to the Father’s love for him, the Father’s promises of resurrection, future glory, that doesn’t diminish the sacrifice Jesus made any more than the writer of Hebrews diminishes it when he says “Jesus endured the cross ‘for the joy set before him.’” If Jesus couldn’t draw comfort from counting on God’s promises and looking forward to his deliverance, why would he call us to do that?

And beyond that, we need to remember that Jesus’ quotation of v.1 isn’t the only reference to Psalm 22 in the crucifixion account. There are multiple allusions.

Mark 15:24 Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

Psalm 22:18 They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.

Mark 15:29 Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads.

Psalm 22:7 All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

Matthew 27:43 He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him.

Psalm 22:8 He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.

And the descriptions of his physical condition in Psalm 22 seems to describe Jesus on the cross a lot more accurately than anything David ever went through. There's even a reference in Psalm 22:16 about his hands and feet being pierced (although there's some debate about whether that word should be translated "pierced" or "pinned"). The book of Hebrews connects section 2 of Psalm 22 with Jesus. And section 2 is the part of the psalm that says God *didn't* forsake him. God is making it crystal clear that he wants us to interpret the events of the crucifixion through the lens of Psalm 22—the whole psalm.

And one of those references is all about the question of whether God had abandoned him. That's what the mockers were saying—that God had indeed forsaken Jesus.

Psalm 22:8 He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.

And that's exactly what the mockers said about Jesus on the cross.

Matthew 27:43 He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him.

They're saying, "Jesus, the reason God isn't rescuing you and taking you down from the cross, the reason you feel like God has abandoned you is because he *has* abandoned you." Are we going to say those mockers were right? No. In Acts 2, Peter uses the fact of the resurrection to prove those mockers were wrong. God did not forsake Jesus, and Peter uses the same word for forsake as Jesus used when he quoted Psalm 22. Their accusation was not true. God had not rejected Jesus. We find out whom God really rejected when God raises Jesus from the dead and exalts him to his right hand, and those mockers are slaughtered under the wrath of God in 70 AD.

So not only is it a mistake to try to say only v.1 of Psalm 22 applied to the crucifixion and the rest was only about David, but you could actually argue the reverse. If the psalm only applied to one party, we'd have to say it applied to Jesus and *not* David. Honestly, I'm really not sure *any* of this psalm applied to David. It seems to me it's a pure messianic prophecy and not a description of something that happened to David. When the mockers said, "Let God rescue him if he delights in him," are we to think that the mockers at the cross just happened to use the exact wording of people who mocked David? That's possible, but it doesn't seem likely to me.

But beyond that, think about sections 2 and 3 of the psalm. The point of section 2 is that God will deliver this one righteous sufferer in a way that will stimulate praise from all of God's people.

The congregation ...you who fear the Lord ...all you descendants of Israel ...the great assembly ...those who fear you ...they who seek the Lord.

Then, section 3 expands out even further, beyond Israel to the whole wide world.

Psalm 22:27 All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him.

This is way beyond David.² And this is why it's so important that we don't just think Jesus was referring to v.1 of Psalm 22. It's why the Holy Spirit inspired the gospel writers to allude to various parts of Psalm 22 over and over when they described the crucifixion. It's why the Spirit, in his foreknowledge, even included some of the exact language of the mockers at the cross way back in Psalm 22. And it's why, just in case we missed all the hints, Jesus just came right out and quoted Psalm 22.

When Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he was telling us how he felt. But he was also telling us, "I'm the fulfillment of Psalm 22. I'm the one who will cry out to God, and God will rescue me in a way that will cause *all* my brothers to shout praises, and people all over the world, for centuries to come, will turn to God and serve him. It may look like I'm being forsaken by God. It definitely feels that way. But the truth is I'm not being forsaken. God will rescue me in a way that will bring salvation to the ends of the earth."

And that's exactly what happened. That was the point of Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost when he preached to the very people who murdered Jesus.

Acts 2:30 David was a prophet and knew that God had promised ...that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. 31 ...he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not forsaken ...32 God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. 33 Exalted to the right hand of God ...36 "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

There's the promise of the ends of the earth turning to God already starting to be fulfilled. Peter doesn't mention Psalm 22, but what he said was a perfect description of the fulfillment of Psalm 22. On the cross, it looked (and felt) like Jesus was forsaken by God, but God heard Jesus' cry, rescued him from the grave, and did so in a way that brought salvation to the whole world for generations to come.

Summary

God turned his face away from Jesus, offered him no comfort or strengthening, and treated him as if he were furiously angry with him. But he wasn't emotionally angry with Jesus, loved him, did not abandon him to the grave, and cared about his suffering (though he didn't let Jesus feel that care). This shouldn't be described as even a temporary forsaking of Jesus because that would imply whenever God is distant it means he has forsaken you, which isn't true. Jesus felt forsaken, but pointed us to Psalm 22 to teach us that he knew he wasn't forsaken. All of Psalm 22 applies to Jesus. And it's questionable whether any of it applied to David.

² That's so clearly messianic that the only way I can see it applying to David would be in the sense that he is a prototype of the Messiah, so in one sense, there will be people all over the world turning to God as a result of God delivering David, but not until 1500 years later when Jesus came around.