

The God-Forsaken Man

Mark 15:33-39 ³ Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. ³⁴ And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" ³⁵ Some of those who stood by, when they heard that, said, "Look, He is calling for Elijah!" ³⁶ Then someone ran and filled a sponge full of sour wine, put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink, saying, "Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to take Him down." ³⁷ And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last. ³⁸ Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. ³⁹ So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!"

Sometimes you will hear people use the words *God-forsaken*. They usually use them to talk about a place: "that God-forsaken country." or "this God-forsaken city." Sometimes they mean that the place is lonely or depressing, now and then they mean something a little more serious, like the immorality of the place. But very few people think about the weight or power of that term "God-forsaken".

What would it really mean to be in a place which God had utterly forsaken? What would it feel like to have God forsake you?

That's such a terrifying prospect that the Bible is filled with promises that God will not forsake His people.

Deuteronomy 4:31 *'(for the LORD your God is a merciful God), He will not forsake you nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers which He swore to them.*

1 Samuel 12:22 ²² *"For the LORD will not forsake His people, for His great name's sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you His people.*

Hebrews 13:5 ⁵ *Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."*

In fact, even those who reject God are not completely forsaken by Him while they live. Jesus said that God causes it to rain on the just and unjust, and causes the sun to rise on the good and evil. No one has truly known what it is to be God-forsaken.

All except one Man. On a Friday afternoon, on a hill outside Jerusalem, one man experienced on earth, what is the essence of hell – to be forsaken by God. Jesus Christ's crucifixion was no doubt one of the most painful ways to die. But we would not say that Jesus necessarily experience more physical pain than any other human ever has. That's not the point of the crucifixion, physical pain does not atone for sin.

But what Jesus experienced on the cross was something which no one had ever or will ever experience while alive on earth – being forsaken by God.

As we study this account of Jesus' experience of being God-forsaken, we'll see the sign of His forsaken, the statement of His forsaking, the suffering of His forsaking, and the success of His forsaking.

I. The Sign of His Abandonment

³ Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

When this sign happens, Jesus has already been on the cross for three hours. One can barely imagine how physically exhausted and devastated his body must have been.

Jesus had been up all night. After sharing the last supper with His disciples, they went to Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed with a kind of anguish never seen before. He was arrested very late Thursday night. He was then taken long before dawn to the former high priest Annas, and tried there. He was then taken to Caiaphas, and tried there. After that, He is tried before the whole Sanhedrin.

Once they have decided He is guilty of blasphemy, He is taken to Pilate, early Friday morning. Pilate questions and when he finds out that Jesus ministered in Galilee, he sends Him to Herod. Herod questions Him and sends Him back to Pilate in a purple robe. Pilate questions Him again, has Him scourged, offers to have Him released as per custom at the Passover, but the Jewish leaders insist that He be crucified. Finally, Pilate gives permission, and Jesus is handed over to the Roman soldiers. They abuse Him, put a crown of thorns on Him, and march Him off to Golgotha. By this time He is so completely physically exhausted from the fatigue of five or six court appearances, a scourging which would have given Him near-fatal wounds, a punishing assault by Roman soldiers, that He can barely stand to carry His own cross, and a man named Simon is told to carry it for Jesus.

Jesus marches up to Golgotha, with women crying, whom He speaks to. He is offered vinegar to dull the pain but refuses it. They nail Him to the cross at 9am

The Romans gamble for His purple robe, while many of the Jewish leaders begin to mock Him, challenging Him to save Himself. Jesus prays for their forgiveness, and forgives one of the criminals crucified with Him, when he repents and believes.

He sees His mother Mary and the apostle John, and tells John to take care of Mary from that day on.

Think of what it would have been like to stand there, near His cross, for three hours. Nothing changes, just three men being tortured by the agony of crucifixion. Bored Roman soldiers just passing the time, observers from Jerusalem passing by, some standing and gloating. If you loved Jesus, what do you do? Where do you look? Do you stand there and stare at His humiliation for three hours? Do you walk away?

Well, after three hours, something dramatic happens. ³ *Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.*

At midday, after three hours of crucifixion, the land goes completely dark, and stays that way for three hours, until 3pm. Matthew, Mark and Luke all report that the darkness fell upon the whole land, for three hours.

This could not have been a solar eclipse, because Passover takes place during a full moon, and you cannot have an eclipse and a full moon at the same time in the same place. There are actually some interesting references from non-biblical sources that suggest this event occurred. Two ancient historians, Thallus, and Phlegon both refer to an eclipse of the sun during full moon in the time of Tiberius Caesar.

Whatever the case, no matter where you were in Israel, you knew something remarkable was happening. If you were one of the Pharisees or Sadducees that had just seen Jesus put to death, what would you make of this? Who has control over the sun? Does the sun darkening typically mean God is pleased?

Throughout Scripture, darkness meant judgement, like when God judged Egypt with darkness. It was the opposite of God's blessing, as in Numbers 6:25, where the blessing reads: **Numbers 6:25** ²⁵

The LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you;
This is the sign of a curse, of wrath, of displeasure, of anger. It is the sign that God is not favouring, but disfavouring, not blessing, but cursing, not abiding, but forsaking.

And now picture sitting in this darkness for another three hours. After these three hours, Jesus breaks the silence.

II. The Statement of His Abandonment

³⁴ *And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"* ³⁵ *Some of those who stood by, when they heard that, said, "Look, He is calling for Elijah!"* ³⁶ *Then someone ran and filled a sponge full of sour wine, put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink, saying, "Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to take Him down."*

Jesus cries out in Aramaic, which was the spoken language in Israel of the time, My God, My God, why have you forsaken me. Some hear it and say he is calling for Elijah, and turn it into another opportunity to mock.

Why they said this is not clear. Jesus was quoting a well-known Scripture – Psalm 22:1. Perhaps with his mouth being almost completely dry, it was hard to understand him. Perhaps they did hear and just chose to mock him.

Why did Jesus say this, and what did He mean? Well, what happens in Psalm 22?

David begins the psalm that way, but how does it end?

Psalm 22:21-25 *Save Me from the lion's mouth And from the horns of the wild oxen! You have answered Me. ²² I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will praise You. ²³ You who fear the LORD, praise Him! All you descendants of Jacob, glorify Him, And fear Him, all you offspring of Israel! ²⁴ For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; Nor has He hidden His face from Him; But when He cried to Him, He heard. ²⁵ My praise shall be of You in the great assembly; I will pay My vows before those who fear Him.*

Did Jesus know how the psalm ended? Yes. In quoting this psalm he was quoting a cry of desolation that still has faith in the God who will ultimately deliver him. He knew that He would rise from the dead. He knew that ultimate exaltation would come.

He did not think God has permanently deserted Him, or that He was going to perish.

So what was He saying? Why did He say this, and say so loudly? To understand that, we must try to understand what Jesus was going through, particularly in these three hours of darkness.

III. The Suffering of His Abandonment

What was happening to Jesus during these hours? Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that God, "...made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

God regarded Jesus as sin. For these three hours, God placed all the sin of the world on Jesus.

You have felt the pain and weight of guilt. You know how anguished you feel when you have done something sinful. And you are a person who sins and does not always see all your sin.

Jesus was perfectly holy and hated all sin. Here, for three hours, he was taking in his own breast all the sin of the world. It is not that he was becoming sinful Himself, but He was being charged with all the sin of the world, sin charged to His account, feeling the liability, the shame, the remorse, the ugliness, the corruption, the loss that sin brings.

But it was not only the weight of the sin he felt, it was what that meant between Him as His Father. When Jesus spoke to people, He always spoke of the union and love between Him and the Father. The Father had publicly declared that Jesus was the Son He loved, in Whom He was well-pleased. But as Jesus was charged with all our sin, the Father could have no fellowship with the Son. Habukkuk 1:13 says, *You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness.*

It is said that 16th c. theologian Martin Luther once sat in his study for hours to meditate on this passage. For hours he sat oblivious to the world around him. Finally, someone heard him say, "God forsaking God . . . no one can understand that" and he went on about his business.

We have all experienced the pain of ended friendships, failed relationships, estranged relatives. How have you felt when that friendship failed, or withered, or was suddenly betrayed? It seems to sap the life out of us, take the joy out of us. This is what He felt.

But it was not only that God the Father broke fellowship with Jesus, and passively turned away. The Scriptures teach that God actively poured out intense anger and hatred upon Jesus as the sin bearer. Jesus became a lightening rod for all the fury and indignation over sin that God had stored up since the beginning of the world. God set Jesus up as the bulls-eye of His target for sin, and shot Jesus through with every arrow He had.

Perhaps you have faced the wrath of someone else. Maybe it was a parent. Maybe you have faced the wrath of an employer, or a drill sergeant in the army, or road rage on the roads. When someone pours wrath on you, it leaves you quite inwardly shaken, disturbed. Another personality has come crashing into your very person, and you tremble afterwards.

What if that anger was not from another human, and not sinful anger, but the righteous anger and hatred of sin from a holy God. If it is a fearful thing to simply behold God, what must it be to experience His fury.

And for that time on the cross Jesus felt the wrath of God, His infinite hatred of sin, crashing into Him. How long could you bear to face the fury of another person? A minute? Two? Ten? For Jesus, it was not 10 or 20 minutes of God's fury. It was three hours. Wave after wave of fury. Arrow after arrow. Blow after blow. Punishment after punishment.

I want to suggest to you that no human or angel could have survived the wrath of God for three hours. Only the God-man could survive that. And only an infinite Person could be punished for three hours, and pay an infinite debt.

Now we can understand Jesus' cry. He was not asking God why God had deserted Him. He knew God would not do that. But in His humanity, He probably did not know how long this suffering of God's forsaking Him would last. So after three hours of wearing the weight of sin, three hours cut off from the Father's love, three hours of experiencing God's bruising, Jesus is effectively asking, My God, why have you left me for so long? Will it never end? God, will you never bring this to a finish?

But it did come to an end. We see right after this,

IV. The Success of His Abandonment

37 And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last. 38 Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!"

We know from the book of John what it was that Jesus cried out with a loud voice: "It is finished." To know that He had borne the full wrath of God, He had paid the debt in full. This was not a scream of agony, or a cry of despair. It was a shout of triumph. It has been done. I have succeeded. I have completed my task. We have won. We have defeated sin and Satan and death. My people will be redeemed. The price has been paid.

He then committed His spirit to the Father, and voluntarily gave up His life.

What was the effect? The veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom. In the Temple there was a thick leather curtain separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place, once a year, to obtain atonement for Israel. The Veils before the Most Holy Place were 20 metres long and 10 metres wide, of the thickness of the palm of the hand, and wrought in 72 squares, which were joined together; and these Veils were so heavy, that, in the exaggerated language of the time, it needed 300 priests to manipulate each. If the Veil was at all such as is described in the Talmud, it could not have been rent in twain by a mere earthquake of the fall of the lintel, although its composition in squares fastened together might explain, how the rent might be as described in the Gospel. (Alfred Edersheim, 2:611.)

If this veil was torn in two, what was God saying? No longer would a High Priest take a sacrifice into the Most Holy Place to obtain atonement any more. Now a final sacrifice had been made, an eternal High Priest had been consecrated, and access to God would now be through Him.

God had forsaken Jesus for those three hours, so that He could have eternal fellowship with those who come to Him through Jesus. Sin is what cause God to forsake man, but those who accept Jesus as their sin-bearer will never be forsaken by Him. God has poured out anger and judgement on Jesus, those who are in Jesus will never face that again.

The reaction of the centurion shows us how we should respond:

39 So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!"

To see that Jesus had experienced this wrath from God, and then cried out in triumph, was enough to show this man that Jesus was the Son of God. And as the darkness lifted, anyone with eyes to see would have known, God's anger has been satisfied. The debt has been paid.

Every description of hell seems to show it to be a place of God's abandonment. It is described as a place of darkness, a place of cursing, a place of decay, a place of torment, a place of weeping. Hell is where God abandons sinners, and leaves them to His justice. People who forsake God in their lives get their wish in the next. They live forever without Him. But God's loving message is this: God the Son experienced that for us! You do not have to.

Let's be careful with those words "God-forsaken." There was only one God-forsaken man – Jesus. He was forsaken by God, so that we need never be. We can turn to Him, forsake our sins and look

to Him for forgiveness.