

# WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

---

## CrossWords (Part 4) | Matthew 27:46-50

### I

I don't know whether my maternal grandfather ever cried out in a clear way that anyone but God could hear. My memories are of a strong, handsome figure. A capable businessman with trophies from countless big game hunting trips scattered around his expansive home -- testimony to a warrior spirit I figured nothing could ever kill.

To this day I don't know exactly why he became an alcoholic, or why one day he turned his gun upon himself. In spite of appearances, he must have felt a terrible loneliness, a sense of hopelessness, an ache of abandonment that may have dated back to the time when my mother's mom left him and soon after died herself at age 29.

I repeat: I never heard my grandfather cry out. But, as I was preparing for this morning, it occurred to me that we don't always recognize the sense of forsakenness, with which many people live. And especially right now.

You probably do not know how often some of the people in your community make the lonely pilgrimage to the graveside of a child or a spouse who will never return. It may hardly occur to you that behind the entertaining posts of that teenager on Instagram lies an agonized heart, wondering why the invitation to go out on a date has not come. We can't hear the cries of the person whose birthday hasn't been remembered in years, or the one who only gets calls from people trying to sell them something. And what of the elderly person, who can no longer go out and find a bit of companionship from the waitstaff at the restaurant, the dry-cleaner, or the store?

The news will talk plenty about it, but you probably won't personally hear the wailing of the many people for whom the economic crash we're living through leaves them feeling so terribly panicked and alone. You may not be aware of the pain of the woman whose womb won't bear the child for which she longs. You may be living three doors down from someone whose marriage is all but over or whose kids no longer call.

I have no idea whether or not you *know* someone like that, or whether maybe you *are* someone like that. But this I DO know. Sometimes, life can leave a soul feeling such cosmic loneliness, such utter abandonment, that all that soul can do is cry out to the heavens above: **"My God!"** Why this? Why now? **"Why have you forsaken me?" (Mat 27:46)**. And because -- more than ever today -- there ARE people like that -- because some of US are people like that -- there is something about Christ's fourth words from the cross that it seems terribly important that we understand.

## II

That Jesus spoke at all seems significant in itself. After all, He had been able to stand in silence when Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate alike rejected him. He had managed to hold His tongue when His disciples betrayed, denied, and deserted Him. He had clenched His teeth as the soldiers flogged and nailed Him. He resisted returning evil for evil when the crowd that had once exalted Him now rejected and tormented Him.

Even Nature herself seems unable to bear sin without speaking. The Apostle Paul once wrote: **We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time (Rom 8:22)**. Anyone who is a student of the melting icecaps, the rising seas, the vanishing rainforests knows how the Creation complains about the abuses it suffers at the hands of sinful humanity.

But the scriptures suggest that what happened on Golgotha that day, from noon until three, was an act so horrific that it seemed to evoke much more than the usual groans. We're told that **"darkness came over all the land" (Mat 27:45)**. It was as if the Creation was weeping and gnashing its teeth at a race so wicked and blind that it could sentence Life itself to a death like that.

Let me pause and observe that even well-educated human beings are capable of colossal ignorance and repeated error. You probably know that the coronavirus started in what are called the "wet wildlife markets" of China. They are places where live creatures soon to be sold and butchered are stacked vertically one atop one another in mesh cages and conditions bound to breed disease. On November 6, 2000, I visited Wuhan. I saw those markets. They are the animal equivalent of the prison stacks America has created and then wondered why our cities are infected with crime and despair. It was in these animal prisons that the SARS epidemic started in 2003. China closed down those markets after SARS, recognizing the danger such unhygienic environments posed to humanity. But they opened again. Why? Because it was profitable. Because there was demand for the perverse products sold there.

In the mysterious iniquity of human nature – a nature so blessed by God's grace and yet so insistent that it BE God – the market for sin's appetites is always thriving. It is a global phenomenon, present in every culture and only coming to head in ours right now. Pride, lust, violence, greed, envy, gluttony, sloth, deceit – all the most deadly viruses – always find a host.

Nowhere did all of this sickness come together so vividly as at the Cross of Christ. At the close of those three hours of horror, something happened almost too gigantic to be contained in mere words. In some mysterious manner, all the little lies and the vilest deceptions... all of the tiny slights and the brutal murders... all of the subtle sins and the great corruption of every person that ever lived or ever will live... were transferred off of humanity and onto Jesus Himself.

In that single instant, the Scriptures say, Jesus Christ **“became a curse for us” (Gal 3:13)**. He absorbed the full consequences of our disease. He took into his body the full infection of sin and death. And at that moment – some theologians believe -- God the Father, who is absolutely pure Holiness, who struggles to gaze upon even the tiniest sin, may have had to turn His face away from His Son. The virus was that intense.

Now, Jesus can bear it when you and I abandon Him for other pursuits and priorities. He *does*. He could bear it when all of humanity abandoned Him to a cross. Without saying a word to betray His pain, He *did*. But at **about three in the afternoon... (Mat 27:46)** (some translations say, “at the ninth hour”), Jesus of Nazareth experienced an abandonment that even HE could not suffer in silence. It was way beyond what my grandfather experienced. It was way beyond what any of us who are going through our present times are experiencing.

He, who (as the Apostle John points out) had been **with God from the beginning (John 1:1-2)** -- who had never known even a single instant of anything but perfect communion with the rest of the Trinity -- endured an isolation so cold, a decline of his market value so precipitous, that the most pitiable sufferer on earth will never know even a corner of it – unless he or she goes to the Hell from which Jesus’ death was designed to spare us.

### III

No wonder Christ cried out. And yet what Jesus said at that moment reveals two incredible truths that can change the experience of OUR trials and suffering in this wintery season of history, if we let them sink in.

We know that Christ’s first hearers misunderstood his words. The Bible says that they thought He was pleading for help from the prophet Elijah. The Jews of that time believed that Elijah had the power to bring God’s mercy from heaven to man. Eager to see such a spectacle, the crowd stopped someone trying to relieve Christ’s agony with a drink and said instead: **Leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him. (Mat 27:49)**. But that’s *not* what Jesus was saying. He was, in fact, quoting Psalm 22. Read it yourself sometime; it’s an amazing passage, for two reasons.

The FIRST is that we can now see it as the prophecy it clearly was. You see, Psalm 22 describes what it was like to undergo crucifixion – only about a thousand years before the Romans invented that form of execution. But the SECOND reason Christ’s citing of this Psalm is amazing is because of what it implies when you know the whole of it. You see, while Psalm 22 *begins* with an agonizing confession of despair over God’s apparent abandonment of his child, it *concludes* with a bold affirmation that in the end -- as bad as it gets -- God will be faithful to save. I’ve never bought the idea that the Father abandoned his son. I understand why Jesus, in his humanity, might have thought so in

his moment of supreme duress; but I think it was only the human part of him that – in that instant – failed to see that his Father was with him always.

Please remember that in this difficult season. Sometimes, the answers to the “Why?” questions just don’t come quickly. Sometimes, in this life, they don’t come at all. The painful truth is that when you’re hanging on the cross of suffering, the heavens are *often* dark and silent, and it would be easy to think that’s the end of the story. But it’s not. In the midst of our dark agonies -- the feelings of abandonment -- when the normal rhythms and familiar economy of our lives collapse and we can’t see anything but a deeper winter coming, we must not forget that the Sun still exists. We must remember that there will one day be an Easter morning when the darkness will be lifted and the questions will be answered. And when you can’t see all the way to the end of the Psalm, at least do as Jesus does -- cry in the direction of GOD.

Which brings us to the second important truth embedded in Christ’s words, and this one may seem like a paradox: The cross of Jesus was, for Him, a moment of separation from the Father; but He was willing to endure it, so that the cross could mean something else for you and me. For us, the cross means not God’s absence, but rather the assurance of God’s unfailing presence in our suffering. Think about that.

In his book, *Night*, Auschwitz-survivor, Elie Weisel, describes seeing a 10-year-old boy being hanged for some minor offense. Because he was so young and so light, the drop from the scaffold didn’t break the child’s neck, but only jerked the rope so tightly around his throat that he was fated to die of slow strangulation. As the boy’s body twisted helplessly in the air, the guards forced Weisel and the others to walk by within a few feet of the child and look directly into his tortured face. The horrified prisoners were sure that they had entered hell itself. ***“Where is God now?”*** moaned a voice from behind Weisel. Then, from further back, came the voice of someone else: ***“I know where God is. He is right there in front of us, right there with us.”***

I ask myself sometimes: Why did Jesus subject Himself to the cross, knowing as He must have that to do so would mean not only physical anguish, but the worst spiritual agony anyone would ever experience? The textbook answers, of course, are: It fulfilled prophecy. It was necessary to cancel out our sin. But, along with Christian author Max Lucado, I can’t help but think that there was one more reason.

*“Something very compassionate. Something personal... I keep thinking of all the people [like my grandfather] who cast despairing eyes toward the dark heavens and cry ‘Why?’ And I imagine Him. I imagine [Jesus] listening. I picture His eyes misting and a pierced hand brushing away a tear. And although He may offer no answer, although He may solve no dilemma, although the question may freeze painfully in mid-air, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that He who also was alone, UNDERSTANDS.”*<sup>4</sup> And I find that somehow that makes a difference. Somehow it helps.

Someone has said that Jesus did not come to do away with suffering but to fill it with his presence.<sup>2</sup> He came that we might have the courage to persevere and to struggle against sin... and deal courageously with our difficulties... and hang tenaciously onto "one another"... until that final day comes when no one will be stacked in cages... and children will no longer hang from gallows... and no one will feel themselves forsaken. I don't control time, but I believe there is coming a day when the virus is defeated... and evil is cast out... and tears will be no more.

Beloved, said Jesus to his followers: **In this world you will suffer. But be brave, for I have overcome the world (John 16:33).** For **I am with you always**, in the darkness as well as the light... when the market is high and when it is low... when the news reports are happy and when they are not... I am with you in all ways, **to the close of this age (Mat 28:20).**<sup>3</sup>

Believe this, beloved, for even in his dying, Jesus spoke words that show us how to live.

Please pray with me...

*We put our trust in you, God. We dare to believe that you are truly WITH US in these times. Whether we are living in ignorance about our conditions or living with an excessive despair, you understand us... you are here with us. Remind us by your Spirit that our ultimate worth and final security has never been in the stock market... that our true hope is not in the survival of these temporary shells we call bodies. Enable us to live by faith in this time. Inspire us to reach out in love to others who are afraid or alone or feeling forsaken. Moved by an awareness of your steadfast presence with us and your power to save, give us courage to live through these times with faith, hope, and love. For we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.*

---

<sup>1</sup>Max Lucado, *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior*, p.48.

<sup>2</sup>Phillip Yancey, *Disappointment With God*.

<sup>3</sup>Matthew 28:20.

For further reading on the subject of suffering, I highly recommend Douglas John Hall's *God and Human Suffering*, Augsburg Publishing House.