

Why Have You Forsaken Me?

SCOTT HOEZEE

The cry of dereliction. It is perhaps the most famous and certainly the most searing of all Jesus' last words from the cross. A cry of abandonment; a cry of loneliness; a cry of utter desolation: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? We sense this is as bad as it gets for Jesus, or for anyone; but what do these words mean? How can God abandon God? What was happening in this moment of Jesus' agony, and what might it mean for us yet today? On this *Groundwork* program, we explore this most arresting cry from our Lord. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are now on program number four of a seven-part series on the seven last words from the cross; a good thing to consider at any time, but certainly this makes for a good Lenten meditation during the season of Lent, as we move up toward the time of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, and ultimately of Easter itself.

So, we have looked at three sayings so far; the first one: Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. A second one where he takes care of his mother and commends her to the care of his disciple John: Son, your mother; mother, your son. And then we also looked at the response of Jesus to the thief...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who asked to be remembered in his kingdom, and Jesus said: Surely I tell you today you will be with me in Paradise; and now, we are up to this one that in the intro we said: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me; which is the one word from the cross which has a clear biblical echo.

DAVE BAST

Right; and it is also maybe at the heart of what is happening on Golgotha. One of the things we said at the outset of this series is the cross is the central truth of the gospel; it is the heart of the Christian faith. What Jesus did in dying on the cross is everything for us as Christians; and we said that in exploring these seven words, we would like to kind of unpack the meaning of that; and with the word that we come to today, we come to the heart of the meaning of Jesus' death. I mean, you know, the first word: Father, forgive them; that is a great example for us to follow...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; grace...all grace.

DAVE BAST

That is amazing. Jesus commending his mother; that is a very human thing; and he sees even the lonely and the needy; and then last week in the last program with the word on Paradise: You will be with me... He expresses this comfort; this hope of heaven. All we have to do is turn to him and he promises that to us; but

today we come really to grapple with the theology of the cross.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and Jesus, as his agony is increasing, he now feels abandoned by God; and the thing he says is very similar to, and probably is a direct quote from, Psalm 22. Psalm 22 is a psalm of lament in the Bible. It begins this way: ¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me; so far from my cries of anguish? ²My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer; by night, but I find no rest. So, those are the first two verses of Psalm 22, and the first one, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” is word for word what Jesus said.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and actually, if you go a little bit further into this psalm there are verses there that describe...they seem to be speaking specifically about his physical suffering, about the scourging and...

SCOTT HOEZEE

“They count my bones and they divide up my garments...”

DAVE BAST

And, you know, they are laughing at me...the dogs are nipping at me...so, the mockery, all the things that he experienced on the cross; but this word of abandonment—of God forsakenness—we call it the cry of dereliction—that has really puzzled theologians and scholars and ordinary Christian believers for a long, long time because it just seems so drastic, so radical...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

That Jesus would feel this abandonment. Some people have sought ways around it to kind of soften it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and one of the ways they do that is by pointing out the fact that, okay, if Jesus was quoting Psalm 22, that was sort of a secret code...a secret symbol Jesus was sending that he really wasn't that abandoned after all because, like many psalms of lament, Psalm 22 ends on a more positive note.

So, here is from near the end of Psalm 22:

²²I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you. ²³You who fear the Lord, praise him. All you descendants of Jacob, honor him; revere him all you descendants of Israel...and so forth and so on...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Psalm 22 ends on an upbeat note of God's having come back, and some people say: See, by quoting the first verse, Jesus is saying: It's not so bad. I am not really abandoned after all. Psalm 22 ends well. I am fine. But I think that is wrong.

DAVE BAST

Right; I do too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

To put it bluntly.

DAVE BAST

I agree with you. It is rather dramatic. The very last verses of Psalm 22 go like this:

²⁴For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one (speaking apparently of God). He has not hidden his face from him, but has listened to his cry for help. ²⁵From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows.

So, there is almost this note of triumph, and that must be what Jesus is really saying, but I'm with you, Scott. I don't think if he meant us to think about the end of the psalm he would have quoted the beginning...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

You know, that is a little tricky game to play, psychologizing Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; anyway, as my friend the Bible commentator, Dale Bruner said, people don't do memory work from a cross. Jesus wasn't trying to help people do a Bible study here by invoking Psalm 22...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is what he felt. Now, the words of Psalm 22:1 came readily to his lips to describe his experience at that moment, but that was the experience; and we are going to talk in the next segment more about how could that be?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is actually what he felt. He was not just kind of faking it when he said he felt abandoned by God. He did.

DAVE BAST

Right; there is another way that some people have suggested to kind of soften this, and they will say: Well, this is what Jesus said, and yes, he was quoting the psalm; he was taking that verse...but he was describing his feelings; he wasn't necessarily describing the truth or the fact of the matter. He was saying he *felt* abandoned by God, just as we often feel abandoned by God, and we often ask the question: Why, God, why have you done this? Why have you allowed this? You seem so far away. Jesus is just going through that same human experience of lament and despair and feeling God forsaken, but it is not true...it is not really true. I don't buy that one either.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, that is just not the depth of his experience here.

DAVE BAST

Besides, we are psychologizing Jesus. How do we know what was going on?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, exactly.

DAVE BAST

We are simply trying to identify ourselves with him...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; let's go with what he said, not with what we think he was feeling...

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have his words. We will talk about that in the next segment, but just as we close out this first part of the program, Dave, it is interesting to me, though, that at this moment of agony still the words of scripture came to him, and a fitting word of scripture came to him, which is evidence that Jesus had spent his whole life, on the human level now of course, as a human being he had spent his life marinating in the scriptures. He was steeped in scripture. He knew scripture by heart; and I think we have all seen people at the end of their lives sometimes with the same thing. How readily the old hymns, how readily Psalm 23 or *Amazing Grace* comes to the lips of people in their final moments, even sometimes people whose dementia has robbed them of so many memories...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But you start singing *Amazing Grace* and they sing with you.

DAVE BAST

Yes, joining right in. So, we are agreed, Scott and I, that when Jesus said: My God, my God, why have you abandoned me; he was saying the simple truth, that in some inexplicable, unfathomable way, God had turned away from him and cut off his life from Jesus; and we are going to begin to try to plumb the depths of *that* truth in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Dave, let's go right to the passage now. We are going to go to Mark 15; this saying is in both Matthew and Mark; we will go with the Mark version here. So, let's hear from Mark 15, where this last word of Jesus from the cross that we are looking at occurs.

DAVE BAST

So, Mark relates that at noon darkness came over the whole land until 3:00 in the afternoon;³⁴ and at 3:00 in the afternoon, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani," which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"³⁵ And when some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he is 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

³⁷With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. ³⁸The curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

³⁹And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

DAVE BAST

So, that holy moment when Jesus breathes his last with a loud cry. We have said several times in the course of this series that we are fitting the words together sort of like a puzzle by putting all four gospel accounts...so, John has three, Luke has three different ones, Matthew and Mark just have this one central word, the fourth word from the cross, the cry of dereliction; and it is one of those instances which are dotted here and there through the scripture, where the gospel writers, who are writing in Greek, preserve the sound of the original words that were spoken, and in this case the Hebrew...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Hebrew words. We think Jesus and the disciples by this time in history were speaking Aramaic, which is a version of Hebrew, but quite a bit different; but this is actually Hebrew...

DAVE BAST

Kind of the common language of that part of the world; not just in Israel, but all over.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, this is the Hebrew that Psalm 22 would have been written in the original Old Testament, which was all in Hebrew; but unfortunately, most of the people standing by the cross were not up on their Hebrew. Maybe they knew Aramaic and maybe they knew Latin or something...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But they didn't know Hebrew very well; so when they hear "Eloi," they hear "Elijah." Now, Eloi means God...my God, actually; but they thought he was calling Elijah. They thought Jesus was getting delirious...thought maybe Elijah would come and take him off the cross...so they give him some wine vinegar, which was kind of an anesthetic, to keep him going a little longer. Keep the show going; this is funny; isn't this funny; now he thinks Elijah can take him down; let's see...let's wait and see; but he wasn't calling Elijah, he was calling out to his God and they just misunderstood the Hebrew.

DAVE BAST

Well, by this time, too, Jesus has been hanging there for at least three hours...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

These terrible three hours of darkness; his suffering has just about become humanly intolerable. As we are going to see in our next program, his lips are parched, his throat is like sandpaper; he can barely croak this out; so, he is terribly thirsty; and as you said, Scott, the crowd...this is just more fun for them. They have been mocking him; they maybe have gotten a little tired of that...of the humor. They are hanging around to see what happens: Oh, wait; here's something new; maybe we are going to see some kind of supernatural miracle man show up...Elijah...so, let's hang in there a little bit longer; and instead they miss maybe the most profound thing that has ever happened in human history.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; because we believe as Christians from all eternity God was triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe that they have constantly been in complete union with each other. They are three different persons, but only together do they make up the one God. Their unity is so strong; their love, their fellowship. They have been one forever; and now it appears that as part of the payment for sin...which we will talk about a little bit more in a bit...now it appears that the Father for sure, but probably the Holy Spirit, therefore, too,

have somehow...who knows how...withdrawn from Jesus. He cannot get access to them for the moment. They have turned their backs on him in a way that from all eternity had never happened within the Godhead...within Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; but now the Son cannot get at the Father, cannot get at the Spirit; and that is God forsakenness; and indeed, the theologian John Calvin said that that was hell.

DAVE BAST

I was thinking as you were talking, Scott, of maybe a small analogy. You know, in 1945 for the first time scientists were able to split an atom...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And they actually broke it apart...broke those almost indissoluble bonds between electron and proton, and the result was an incredible explosion...a mushroom cloud; and in some even more profound way, the indissoluble, indestructible bonds of love that join Father, Son, and Spirit into one God were broken, were ruptured on the cross as the Son of God bore the sin of the whole world. You mention Calvin and the Reformers' view that this was when Jesus literally tasted hell...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And tasted it for us because that is the definition of hell. Hell isn't about outer darkness or brimstone and fire and all of that; the great preacher and poet, John Dunn said those things are tickling compared to the reality of hell. Hell is actually separation from God...God, who is life; God, who is love...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

God, who is everything.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as many theologians have pointed out, the world's most hardened atheist today, who wants nothing to do with God actually has no idea what that experience is like because even an atheist still is living in God's world and could turn to God at a moment's notice. God is still there for even the atheist, but not in hell. You know, C. S. Lewis once said that God taught us to pray...Jesus taught us to pray: Your will be done; but a lot of people refuse to say that to God, so in the end, God will say to them: Fine, *your* will be done, then.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You didn't want anything to do with me; you will never have anything to do with me, and that is the experience of hell, and that is what Jesus did. So, in the Apostles' Creed, according to the Reformers anyway, when we say the line: He descended into hell, Calvin says that was this moment on the cross; not a literal descent into a place, but the moment of being abandoned by Father and Spirit, which is sin's greatest and worst punishment.

DAVE BAST

He felt it during those three hours of darkness; and maybe that is why the darkness descended, to kind of indicate in some physical way, as a sort of parable, what Jesus was experiencing on the cross; not because of his own sin, but because of ours; and that is the depth of love that we try to express in our own stumbling and sometimes feeble way when we explain the basic truths of the Gospel of Christ dying for us...Christ actually tasting hell for us as he hung there and cried out with that loud cry: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? How God can forsake himself, how the Father and the Son can somehow be estranged, we do not understand...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

But we believe he did it, and he experienced it, and he did it for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

So that we don't have to go through it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in just a moment let's think about that: What are the implications for our lives today that Jesus had this experience?

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*. We are talking about the fourth word from the cross, the cry of dereliction: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? In this word, we come, really, to the heart of the gospel; how Christ became for us sinners our substitute, our sacrifice, the one who tasted, not just death, but even hell, even separation from God, on our behalf so that we don't go through that ourselves.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and interestingly, the pastor and theologian, Fleming Rutledge released a book just recently, about a year/year-and-a-half ago, called *The Crucifixion*. It is a masterful work; and she points to a very interesting verse from 2 Corinthians 5:21, where the Apostle Paul wrote something that has puzzled theologians for years. So, here is 2 Corinthians 5, starting at the 18th verse, where Paul writes:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. ¹⁹That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting peoples' sins against them, and he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰We are, therefore, Christ's ambassadors as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. ²¹God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

And as Fleming Rutledge points out, what does it mean that God made Jesus to be sin? How was Jesus made to be sin?

DAVE BAST

Well, yes; and certainly, what it means, I guess, at its simplest level, if we can kind of reduce it to basics is that he took our place. As sinners, we deserve that experience of being cut off from God. So much comes together in the whole course of the Bible at this moment and becomes more understandable for us. For example, when Adam and Eve first sinned, God said to them: If you disobey me, in the day that you eat that, you will die; and yet, they didn't die, at least not literally...physically, but he was talking about a different

kind of death...spiritual death...leading ultimately to eternal death or eternal separation from God...eternally being cut off; and as Jesus experiences this in his infinite goodness and his deity, really, as God in the flesh, somehow he makes an infinite satisfaction for that in our place, and experiences on our behalf what we should have had.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. So, God made him to be sin...he made him to be us, really, as you just said. This is what is sometimes called the substitutionary aspect of the atonement. There are lots of different theories on how Jesus saved us in the atonement. I tend to think they are different aspects of the atonement...

DAVE BAST

There are a lot of ways we could talk about it, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but the substitutionary one has been a leading one in history: He took our place; and that has...I mean, obviously theologically and in terms of our very salvation, that has a lot of deep, deep, deep meaning; but I think practically, even for today, Dave, we can think about the fact that by taking our place in the experience of hell, as we were just saying in the prior segment...by going to hell for us so we don't have to, we can be assured that we will never experience hell; we will never be truly abandoned by God. Jesus did that and had that experience for us.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That doesn't mean, though, that lament is still wrong, right? I mean, there are those seasons when we still feel that way.

DAVE BAST

We can still feel something, yes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Absolutely.

DAVE BAST

But if I could just piggyback on that for a moment; I mean, ever since I was a child, you know...I was raised in the Church and communion was always a big deal back then, you know. It happened four times a year, so...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, pretty rare.

DAVE BAST

It was always according to the liturgy; and the same words were always read. It was a longer service; and I just think, as an impressionable child, those words kind of stuck with me, and I have never been able to forget the segment in our communion service where the minister said: He took upon himself our flesh and blood and fulfilled for us all obedience to the divine law, even to the bitter and shameful death of the cross, where he cried out with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," (there is our word); and then it added this line: So that we might be accepted by God and never be forsaken by him. I just love that thought, because he was forsaken for those moments on the cross that seemed like an eternity. Perhaps as an eternal being, they were an eternity in a sense for him; and so fulfilled for us that payment, and we will never be forsaken as a result...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

We will never be forsaken by God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have our dark nights of the soul sometimes; we have seasons in our lives when we pray the psalms of lament, like Psalm 22. The psalms of lament are in the Bible as model prayers for us, so it is okay to tell God: It feels like you are not here; it feels like you have gone off duty; it feels like when I pray you are not picking up the phone on your end of the conversation. We will feel that way at times, but the great assurance is, it is not the ultimate truth. God is never going to abandon us, even when we feel abandoned for a season; and that is, Dave, as you said, because of what Jesus did. This is what being God's Son means.

You know, in Mark's gospel every time somebody identified Jesus as God's Son, Jesus said: Shhh; don't tell anybody. Keep it secret.

DAVE BAST

Scholars call it the Messianic secret...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Messianic secret.

DAVE BAST

And they wonder why is that, and probably the best reason is because they wouldn't have understood what kind of Messiah he was supposed to be.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, they would have jumped to the wrong conclusion; but, there is only one person in Mark's gospel who says this is the Son of God and is *not* told to be quiet, and it is the soldier at the cross, and he is not told to be quiet because it is okay to say it. Now that you see what being God's Son means—the depths of agony, the depths of hell—when the soldier saw how he died, Mark says, he said: Surely this was the Son of God; because now that Jesus has gone to the end, now we know what being the Son of God really means.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is an old saying for the military, RHIP: Rank Hath Its Privileges...and apparently the privilege of ultimate rank, being God, means the privilege of lowering yourself and giving of yourself and even dying yourself. Can God die, somehow? Yes, God did die. Can God go to hell? Can God abandon himself? Yes, somehow he did, so that we could be saved; and that is wonderful, good news for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks be to God. Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast. We want to know how we can help you to dig deeper into the scriptures. So visit groundworkonline.com and tell us topics and passages you would like to dig into on *Groundwork*.

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