

My God, my God, why did you forsake me, Bethesda Coffee Morning, 5 June 2013.

As you know we are part way through a short series of talks about the so-called 'Seven sayings from the cross'. This week we have in fact reached mid-way. As we noted on previous weeks, the first three of our Lord's seven sayings focused on the needs of others. But this – the fourth and central (and longest) of the sayings – is very different.¹ Our Bible reading comes from Mark's gospel, chapter 15² ...

And it was the third hour when they crucified Him ... And with Him they crucified two robbers ... and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "He was numbered with the transgressors".

And those who passed by derided Him The chief priests with the scribes also mocked Him ... and those who were crucified with Him also reviled Him.

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

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why did you forsake me?"³

Allowing for the way in which the Jews marked the time of the day, our reading makes it clear that our Lord was crucified about 9 o'clock in the morning.⁴ But at high noon an awful, eerie, unnatural darkness enveloped the land.⁵

And so it was that, if our Lord's birth had been heralded – marked – by a supernatural burst of light during the night-time,⁶ His death was now marked by a supernatural darkness for three hours from mid-day – as God cloaked and shrouded the land in a darkness which served, in part at least, to veil from men's prying eyes the fearful transaction conducted between Him and His sinless – but sin-bearing – Son.^{7,8}

We have no record of any words uttered audibly by our Lord during His three hours of desolation. But at the end of the period of darkness – at 3 o'clock in the afternoon⁹ – Jesus loudly uttered this – the most harrowing cry ever to pierce the skies – a cry of desolation which, unless I am mistaken, not only rent the air around Him but rang through the very courts of heaven itself.

And every word of His cry was significant.

'My God, my God, why did you ...?'

'I can understand why *my nation* disowned and forsook me – for I came to my own, and my own received me not. I understand full well *their* rejection – recognising, they claimed, no king but Caesar. Yes, I understand that. And I can understand why Judas betrayed me and Peter denied me, and, indeed, why all *my disciples* (who once forsook everything for my sake) have now forsaken *me* and fled.¹⁰

'Yes, I understand why at the 'place' Gethsemane, I was deserted and *forsaken by my disciples*, and why at the 'place' Gabbatha, I was *forsaken by my nation*.¹¹ But why now, at the 'place' Golgotha, did *you* abandon and *forsake me*. Why did *you* deny me any sense of your presence? For three hours my eyes have seen no sunlight, but why could I not have been granted just *one* glimpse of the sunshine of your face – of the light of your countenance?'

'My God, my God, why did you forsake me?'

'Yes, I understand you once telling Moses that, when your people Israel would worship other gods and would forsake you, that your anger would be kindled against them and that you would *forsake* them.¹² Yes, I understand why, because of their repeated sin, you later '*forsook your house*' – the Jerusalem temple.¹³ But why did you forsake *me*?

'Forsake me – your own beloved Son – the One *you* loved before the foundation of the world¹⁴ – the One who loved *you* more than anything or anyone else – so that I was able to say earlier, 'therefore my Father loves me, because I lay down my life',¹⁵ and – as the supreme act and demonstration of my love – 'that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave me commandment, so I do'.¹⁶

'Why did you forsake me – your Son, who treasured your presence above anything else – who could say *to the Jews*, 'He who sent me is with me. The Father has not left me alone, for I always do those things that please Him', and *to my disciples*, 'the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me'.¹⁷

'Why did you dry up that sacred stream of communion and loving fellowship which had flowed throughout my earthly life and abandon *me* to judgment? Why, after enjoying *your smile* for over 12,000 days, have I now had to endure *your frown* for three agonising hours? Why did my anguished cries rise up to a silent heaven?¹⁸

Ah, our Lord knew well why! His words, 'My God, my God, why did you forsake me?' were in fact a quotation from the Old Testament ... from the first verse of one of David's psalms – the third verse of which holds the key to it all ... 'But you are holy'.

Yes, He, the Sinless One, had been forsaken – and necessarily forsaken – by the Holy One. For, although there was no cause in the Lord Jesus *personally* that God should forsake Him (far from it), yet, as the apostle Paul so carefully expressed it, God 'made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us'.¹⁹

In the familiar language of Isaiah chapter 53, 'the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all'.²⁰ He – the sinless One – became our sin-bearer and stood in our place ... and for that reason – and for that reason only, as He knew – God hid His face from Him – for that reason only, God forsook Him. Earlier our Lord had suffered from men because He was righteous; now He suffered from God – not because *He was* righteous – but because *I wasn't*.

And so it was that, because the Sinless One was made sin for me, the Beloved One was forsaken for me.

Did God then *actually* forsake His only begotten and well-beloved Son? Did He *actually* hide His face from the only sinless, spotless, perfect man that ever lived? Did He *actually* close His ear to the cry of One who had lived only to do His will and to glorify His name? Yes; God did all of these.

And why, pray? Because He knew that there was no other way for us sinners to be saved. As the apostle Paul once expressed it, 'if a person is put right with God through the Law (through, that is, his or her own efforts and works), it means that Christ died for nothing!'²¹ Our Lord's 'cry of dereliction' warns us never to minimize either the enormity – the horror and loathsomeness – of our sin, or the cost – the immeasurable cost – of our salvation.

But for those whose trust is in Him alone for their salvation, it is sheer bliss to know that the very same Saviour who *Himself* was once forsaken *for us*, has pledged that *we* shall never be forsaken *by Him* ... for the New Testament assures us (and I quote) that, 'He has said, "I will never leave you nor *forsake* you"'.²² Make no mistake, *He* prayed the prayer, 'My God, my God, why did you forsake me?' that *I* might never have to pray it.

I close with the words of a hymn written a little over 150 years ago ...

Oh, hear that piercing cry!
What can its meaning be?
'My God! my God! oh! why
Hast Thou forsaken me?'

Oh 'twas because our sins
On Him by God were laid;
He who Himself had never sinned
For sinners, sin was made.²³

Footnotes

¹ This saying is recorded only by Matthew and Mark – neither of whom records any of the other six sayings.

² Mark 15. 25-34.

³ The verb “forsaken” is not in the perfect tense, as it translated in the Authorized Version, but in the aorist; and it implies that during the three hours of darkness Christ had silently endured His desolation, which had now reached its close.

⁴ At the hour of the morning sacrifice.

⁵ Brought about by the same hand which sent the plague of darkness upon the Egyptians, Exod. 10. 21-23.

⁶ Luke 2. 9-11.

⁷ It was not an eclipse of the sun because this was Passover time, the time of the full moon. That is, the moon was then around the other side of the earth from the sun. And in any case, eclipses do not last that long. A solar eclipse never continues beyond a quarter of an hour – but the darkness continued for three hours. It was as if the startled sun sympathized with its Creator. And well it might. For He was hanging on the cross by whom all things were made and by whose powerful word all things are upheld!

⁸ I cannot help but think of how Amos spoke of darkness on the land as a sign of God’s judgment; ‘it shall come to pass in that day, says the Lord God, that I will make the sun go down at noon, And I will darken the earth in broad daylight ... I will make it like one mourns for an only son’, Amos 8. 9-10. And how, I wonder did God the Father feel about His one and only Son?

⁹ The time of the evening sacrifice.

¹⁰ Mark 14. 50. Once they forsook their nets for Him, Mark 1. 18 – now they forsook Him, Mark 14. 50. Once they forsook all for Him, Luke 5. 11; now they all forsook Him!

¹¹ John 19. 13-16,

¹² Deut. 31. 16-17.

¹³ Jer. 12. 7.

¹⁴ John 17. 5. For One who enjoyed this intimacy, such abandonment must have been agony. There are men who live without any thought of God, and not seeing God’s face is no trouble to them. On the contrary, they dread to see God, These are men who love sin, and therefore do not love God. But Jesus lived always and ever in the conscious knowledge of the Father’s love.

¹⁵ John 10. 17.

¹⁶ John 14. 31.

¹⁷ John 8. 29; 16. 32.

¹⁸ Psa. 22. 2.

¹⁹ 2 Cor. 5. 21.

²⁰ Isa. 53. 6 ... ‘The Lord caused our iniquity to rush on the Lord Jesus, falling on Him as some hostile army’.

²¹ Gal. 2. 21.

²² Heb. 13. 5.

²³ William Russell. Written 1861. <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/m/o/m/momarred.htm>