

"My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?"
by Rom A. Pegram (3/22/20)

The Gospels record seven last statements of Jesus. Luke and John record three each, but Matthew and Mark each tell us of *only one* statement Jesus made from the cross. Surely, Jesus said more than that ... but for these two Gospel writers, *this one statement was all that needed to be recorded*. ... For many, it's the most moving, disturbing, and powerfully haunting statement of the seven: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

These words reflect not only the darkness of this horrific experience Jesus endured, but also the darkness of the majority who surrounded him that day. Yet, as we study the psalm Jesus was praying, we'll discover those words may just point to a deeper faith than we first suspect—a faith that sustained him through his time on the cross. Folks, let's listen to the reality of Jesus on the cross, as told by Mark (15:29-36a, NLT); then we'll hear from yet another witness who was at the cross with Jesus that day...

The people passing by shouted abuse, shaking their heads in mockery. "Ha! Look at you now!" they yelled at him. "You said you were going to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days. ³⁰ Well then, save yourself and come down from the cross!" ³¹ The leading priests and teachers of religious law also mocked Jesus. "He saved others," they scoffed, "but he can't save himself! ³² Let this Messiah, this King of Israel, come down from the cross so we can see it and believe him!" Even the men who were crucified with Jesus ridiculed him. ³³ At noon, darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. ³⁴ **Then at three o'clock Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"** ³⁵ Some of the bystanders misunderstood and thought he was calling for the prophet Elijah. ³⁶ One of them ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, holding it up to him on a reed stick so he could drink.

And now we hear from 'a man in the crowd' who was there... Jason?

It was a morbid sense of curiosity that made us stop. We were on our way to the city on the first day of the festival when we noticed the crowd watching as three men hung nailed to Roman crosses. It was a gruesome way to die: hanging by the hands and feet—with the added humiliation of being stripped of clothing—and slowly dying as breathing became increasingly impossible. For all its horror, we were drawn to take a closer look at the suffering inflicted on these men.

I was embarrassed to be watching yet unable to turn away. It was clear as I looked at the crowd that there was something unusual about the man in the center. Some were hurling insults at him. Three women stood weeping near him. He'd clearly been flogged—the bloodied stripes giving witness to the cruelty of his captors. I asked what had he done wrong? Someone in the crowd answered, "That's Jesus, the man from Galilee, who many believed would lead the revolt to expel the Romans. But his way of

dealing with the Romans was to tell his followers to show them kindness! He seemed more intent on revolting against the Sanhédrin (*pronounced with a long ē*). It was they who convinced Pilate that he was a threat to Roman rule. So here we are with a pacifist preacher crucified as a threat to the Emperor!”

The crowd around Jesus was restless. Some of the merchants seemed to gloat that he who had cast them out of the Temple courts a few days earlier was now getting his “just reward.” I’d like to say that as we watched this scene unfold, our hearts were filled with compassion, but it was quite the opposite. The anger and venom of the others was like an infection, rapidly spreading to each of us. My friend Levi was the first to join in the act, saying, “He got what he had coming to him. He preached salvation, but look at him now. This friend of drunkards and prostitutes couldn’t save a soul!”

My friend Jacob looked up at Jesus and shouted, “Who do you think you are anyway? Some kind of Messiah you’ve turned out to be. Look at you—naked, bleeding, dying!”

Levi picked up the refrain, “I’m sick just looking at you. Get it over with already!” As I listened to them shouting, hate began to well up in me. This man hadn’t done anything to me, yet as the others were shouting I found myself filled with anger. I walked up to him and said, “Some Jew you are. You make me sick! Tell us to love our enemies! This is what happens to people who love their enemies! Listen, you’re a nobody!” And then I spat on him.

I don’t know why I did it. He hadn’t done anything to me. In fact, by all accounts he was a good man. But somehow, hearing the priests and religious leaders mocking him, my friends hurling insults at him, and even the thief on the cross next to him maligning him, a kind of evil seized my heart. I discovered that day that I had the capacity to hate an innocent man and a sick desire to be a part of making him hurt.

It was after I shouted at him that he looked up to the heavens and shouted the words of the psalmist: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When I heard him cry out, I was filled with shame. *My God ... what had we done?*

Folks, before Jesus uttered his ‘cry of dereliction’ (abandonment), the Roman soldiers had already bullied him and beat him to within an inch of his life. The crowd had mocked him. Passers-by had taken their shots too. And, of course, the chief priests and scribes had insulted him beyond imagination, along with the two thieves. As we get into this story and realize what was really taking place that day, we see it wasn’t enough for all these folks to crucify him; they wanted to crush him—to dehumanize him—in every way. It’s what many would call a ‘mob mentality’ that took over! Are you familiar with that?

There was once a young man whose name was ... **Richard**. He was a year ahead of me in high school. And ‘the mob’ at our high school finally got the best of him.

There was primarily one bully who was at the heart of the day’s events. He was one of the ‘cool kids,’ though in hindsight he wasn’t acting very cool when it came to

Richard. Richard, you see, desperately wanted to *fit in* somewhere in this small high school. He tried a variety of activities, including going out for football. Richard, however, wasn't much of an athlete. Along with that, he was big in size—somewhat overweight, so easily picked on. And Richard got more than his share...

Things kind of blew up in a late-day weight room session where both Richard and the bully were present. I was also there, along with some other football players. The bully pushed and pushed and pushed Richard's buttons until Richard just couldn't take it anymore. Richard, angrier than I'd ever seen him before, finally left ... and *the bully thought he'd won*...

Football practice took place right after school was out for the day ... and this day was no exception. I was usually one of the last ones suited up and out on the field for practice (and boy was I glad). As I came out of the locker room and went out the back doors of the school toward the football field, there was a commotion. It didn't take me long to realize what was going on, so I stayed back in the school—with others—until the commotion was over. Richard had returned to the school, loaded 30-06 in hand, and looking for the bully. Long story short, the bully had run off the school property and into the nearby town park to hide, Richard was talked out of his rifle by the coaches, no one was physically hurt, and Richard was hauled off to get help...

Folks, I have to tell you, even though Richard was the one who was carted off that day, he wasn't the only one that needed help. You see, it wasn't just one bully who drove Richard to do what he did. It was all of us in a sense—all of us who wanted to fit in with the 'cool kids' and follow the bully. I was one of those on that day ... who'd chimed in to drive Richard to the brink of insanity. And, like that second thief on the cross, I had to turn to Jesus after that and ask him to rescue me...

It's been said that at the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, it wasn't really Jesus who was on trial; it was humanity who was on trial—before God! Who was guilty of 'mob mentality' that day? Who was guilty of trying to dehumanize Jesus at the cross? All of us... *We're all prone to stooping this low* ... and Jesus, in his humanness, felt abandoned, just like Richard. But you know what? God's mercy and grace are there even for sinners like me ... and maybe all of us at times...

Folks, ONCE WE SEE OURSELVES IN THE CROWD, THEN WE'RE PREPARED TO ACTUALLY HEAR THESE WORDS OF JESUS: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Folks, *here's what you need to know today*:

JESUS KNOWS WHAT ABANDONED FEELS LIKE! The fact Jesus felt abandoned on this day flies in the face of our understanding of the Trinity—that Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... which may be why Luke and John didn't include this in their Gospels. All I know is this, theologically: *Jesus was both human and divine* ... at the same time. Could this have been Jesus, in all his humanness, crying out to God the Father? One thing's for sure: In that moment, as Jesus prayed these words, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the World, felt abandoned or forsaken by God ... and Matthew and Mark recorded that reality!

For Matthew and Mark, instead of the idea that these words diminished the majesty or dignity of Jesus, I think they both saw the majesty and dignity of Jesus *in* his prayer! For

them, Jesus was simply experiencing the God-forsakenness every one of us experience at some point in our lives. He knew what it was to feel that God, his Father, had abandoned him. He knew what it was like to feel hopelessness and despair!

As a pastor, I'm thankful that Jesus knows what 'abandoned' feels like! When parishioners are walking through dark times themselves, this is one of the scriptures I remind them of ... and the fact that God understands too! He's been there ... in Jesus!

I absolutely love Jesus for going through this horrific experience, because it tells me that he identifies with, understands, and has compassion on each one of us as we walk through dark or difficult times in our lives. Next, Look at this:

JESUS TEACHES US ABOUT SUFFERING/SACRIFICE FOR OTHERS. Folks, Jesus words to us today reveal to me ... true sacrificial LOVE!

Fact: Jesus' death was not painless or without suffering! A part of the reason Jesus came was to offer *the gift of suffering* for us. He died so the world might live! He suffered for sin so we wouldn't have to! And, here, Jesus shows us what sacrificial, redemptive LOVE looks like...

Deliberate sacrifice to save others is costly—not only in time & money, but in the emotional & spiritual suffering that comes when we give ourselves to others! I'm reminded of lyrics from one of the most powerful hymns about the cross...

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
 What wondrous love is this, O my soul!
 What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
 To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
 To bear the dreadful curse for my soul.

I can't help but think of our members & friends here who do summer mission trips. They're a great example of following Jesus in this way—suffering/sacrificing for the sake of others! As followers of Christ, we need to be ready to do what's inconvenient, uncomfortable, sacrificial, and even risky in order to be a part of his redemptive work in this world. It's Jesus who taught us that on the cross, didn't he? And finally...

JESUS TEACHES US HOW TO HANDLE TOUGH TIMES FOR OURSELVES. Folks, I want you to notice how Jesus handled these particular moments in his life when he felt abandoned and forsaken by God. He chose to *PRAY*—the 'cry of dereliction' being the first verse of a psalm Jesus would have known by heart—praying this from the cross! And, let me suggest, that Jesus was doing more than praying; he was actually *WORSHIPING!*

Look at Psalm 22:1-2 (NLT) for a moment:

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help? ² Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer. Every night you hear my voice, but I find no relief.

It would've been like this: You hear me singing to myself, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound..." and in your mind you're saying to yourself, "...who saved a wretch like me." This is what would've been going on at the cross that day. Jesus was singing the first line ... but his audience would've been very familiar with the rest. The hymn goes on to talk about a time when King David suffered at the hands of his enemies. But, *the psalmist doesn't end there—thank heavens!* Just as many of us are familiar with the JOY of the last verse of 'Amazing Grace,' so Jesus' audience would've been familiar with how Psalm 22 ends (V. 24, NLT)! *Here it is:*

For he has not ignored or belittled the suffering of the needy. He has not turned his back on them, but has listened to their cries for help.

Could it be Jesus chose to pray the opening words of Psalm 22 as he suffered on the cross to point not only to his pain and despair, but also to his trust that God had, in fact, heard him and would deliver him? I think, as Paul Harvey would say, 'that's the rest of the story'...

Folks, we should all remember these take-aways from Jesus' words to us today:

- *We're meant to find ourselves in the crowd*—sinners all of us, not above stooping to a level lower than Jesus would want, if we're not careful...
- *We're meant to see the costliness of God's grace*—Jesus' pain and feelings of abandonment being *very real*—our best example of sacrificial LOVE...
- And, finally, *we need to remember ... the One to whom we pray in our darkest hour knew firsthand the feelings of hopelessness, doubt, and despair...*

Do you see the LOVE, folks? I hope so... Just as the feelings of abandonment and God-forsakenness, and even death itself, would not be the end of Jesus' story ... neither will they be the end of ours. God has a very different 'final word' for those of us who believe...