

Was Jesus Literally Forsaken?

What is the meaning of "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1)



Did the Father literally forsake Jesus at the cross? The aramaic phrase spoken by Jesus on the cross, translated "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" is often taken to mean just that (Matt. 27:46).

Generally, the idea is that since Jesus was made to be sin on our behalf (2 Cor. 5:21), then it was necessary for Him to suffer a form of spiritual death — separation from the Father. This was the penalty paid by Jesus. Proof of this is seen in the phrase under question, along with 2 Corinthians 5:21.

Granted, a brief look at the phrase, spoken at that particular time, lends itself to the conclusion that Jesus really was forsaken by the Father. It perhaps makes sense to think that the penalty Jesus had to pay on our behalf is a temporary spiritual separation from the Father. So we reason. But this conclusion is really based upon two things: 1) the phrase under question, and 2) our own reasoning and speculation as to how Jesus bore our sins. Other than this, the Bible nowhere says in any explicit sense that Jesus was forsaken. I believe it is just the opposite.

My conviction is that Jesus was not literally forsaken by the Father as He was on the cross. I want to list a few items that ought to be considered in coming to a conclusion about this issue. As I do this, I realize that not every question can be answered. I do not pretend to know or understand everything that happened between Jesus and the Father. All of the workings of deity are not made known to us; and we should be very careful about speculating about these things (e.g., saying that the 3-hour darkness must have signified God's withdrawal of fellowship from Jesus;

such is pure speculation). I think we can consider a few points about this, and even give some thought as to how this has any application to us. So, here goes.

1. The consequence of the position is not very attractive. Think about it. Jesus came to do the will of the Father, which involved His suffering and death on the cross (Heb. 10:5-10). Jesus carried out the Father's will with absolute perfection. Not a single instance of sin can be named in His life. And in the context of speaking about His death, Jesus said, "And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him" (Jn. 8:29). Now if the Father did actually forsake Jesus on the cross,

then this means that it is possible for God to forsake one who has done everything asked of him. That's not a very pleasant thought; I don't think we can afford to think of God in this way. If God the Father could forsake One who never sinned, what about those of us who have sinned and been forgiven? This does not prove the case, but it is a consequence to be reckoned with.

2. Paying the price for our sins did not necessitate spiritual separation of the Father and the Son. In response to the first point, someone might think, "But Jesus was paying the price for sin; doesn't that change things?" The question is, did Jesus become guilty of those sins, or was he paying a redemptive price for the sins? If He became guilty of the sins, then yes, separation from the Father would have occurred.

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But if not, and He was simply paying a price of redemption, then spiritual separation was not necessary.

In paying the price for our sins, Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. If the price was temporary separation from the Father, then the sacrifice only did what we all have already experienced. Since all have sinned, all have been spiritually separated from God. If Jesus came to do that, then He only experienced what we have already

through the shedding of that blood that we are forgiven (Eph. 1:7). I believe this is the import of the idea that Jesus was "made sin" (2 Cor. 5:21), and that He became "a curse" for us. He was not literally sin, but He was made a sin-offering. Jesus did not become guilty of the sins anymore than the animals involved in the Old Testament sacrifices became literally guilty. The shedding of the blood became the means of forgiveness and the way by which the wrath of

into two major parts: 1. Forsaken by God (vv. 1-21), and 2. Delivered by God (vv. 22-31). The psalm begins with the desperate phrase quoted by Jesus, but as it proceeds it expresses a victorious assurance of deliverance.

b. In the psalm, the quoted phrase does not intend to express the idea that God has literally and actually forsaken anyone. The forsaking is in appearance, not in reality. The psalm fits quite well with all of the events that were happening when Jesus was on the cross. We should not see the words of Jesus on the cross in a vacuum, for other parts of the psalm fit with the events of the cross; other prophecies are fulfilled (e.g., vv. 7-8, 16-18). Verses 7-8 express exactly what happened with those who mocked and sneered at Jesus. They did not think that God would deliver Jesus because He appeared so despised and smitten by God. It was the people who esteemed Jesus to be smitten and afflicted by God (Isa. 53:4).

c. The psalm shows that, in reality, the one uttering the cry has been heard. Verse 22 marks a change from defeat to victory. And notice verse 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 for help, He heard."

d. Thus the phrase uttered by Jesus, taken from this psalm, was not intended to convey the idea that the Father actually forsook Him. It did convey the idea that He appeared forsaken, but if the hearers knew the psalm from which Jesus quoted, they would also need to think of the victory expressed in the latter part of it. And I find it interesting that just before Jesus "gave up His spirit," He said, "It is finished." This statement coincides with the last verse of Psalm 22, referring to the fact that God has "per-

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suffered. It should be obvious that Jesus did not pay for sins in the way I would have had to pay for those sins myself. Thus, the price Jesus paid was not:

a. Temporary separation. We've already suffered that. If this is the sacrifice made by Jesus, then we have already paid the price.

b. Eternal separation. That's obvious enough, since Jesus is in heaven (Col. 3:1). But if He died separated from the Father, how could He have gone to Paradise (Luke 23:43)? At what point did Jesus lose fellowship with the Father; and at what point did He regain it? Nothing in the Bible indicates either of these. To say that Jesus was abandoned by the Father demands speculation as to when He was forsaken, and when He was taken back into fellowship. Lack of passages on these points should prevent us from such speculation.

3. When we look at the various passages that speak of the price paid by Jesus, they point to the blood shed by Jesus as a sin-offering. Jesus is the lamb slain before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). It is with His precious blood that we are redeemed (1 Pet. 1:18-19). It is

God was appeased. In contrast to the animals, Jesus came to do the will of God. "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:10). None of the passages indicate that the sacrifice of Jesus included a spiritual separation from the Father, or a forsaking of the Son by the Father. There is no question that Jesus suffered spiritually and emotionally. But, it appears that His greatest emotional pain was being experienced in the garden before He actually went to the cross (Luke 22:44). These passages show that the Father aided Him through His angels. Jesus was in pain, even though not abandoned.

4. Now, what about the phrase itself: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me"? The key to the use of the phrase by Jesus is to be found in its source. This phrase begins the well-known Psalm 22. By quoting the first line of the Psalm, Jesus was appropriating the message of the Psalm to Himself. A look at this psalm shows that the one who uttered this phrase was not literally forsaken by God. Note the following:

a. The Psalm can be broken down

formed it," i.e., that God has carried out justice and finished the work of providing for salvation for all of mankind (vv. 25-31). In dying on the cross, Jesus carried out this work. He finished the work that God had promised and foretold so long before.

5. When Jesus uttered the cry, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" He was not asking for an answer. If we take it to literally mean that God forsook Jesus, then we would also have to take it to mean that Jesus didn't know why. He was referring to Psalm 22 as the fulfillment of the prophecy. The use of that phrase in the psalm itself does not lend

anything to the concept that Jesus literally was forsaken. Rather, it points to the victorious nature of God's deliverance in the midst of a time that appeared so dismal and forlorn. Jesus was not forsaken. He was simply awaiting the deliverance that He knew the Father would provide. Now if one uses Jesus' words on the cross to say that the Father literally forsook Jesus, it would need to be proved that Jesus intended those words to convey something different than the way it is used in the Psalm.

Is There An Application For Us?

This is not just an academic exercise. The psalm, and its use by Jesus, has a tremendous meaning for us as God's people. What are some lessons we can learn and apply?

1. When times are so difficult that it seems no one cares, we have assurance that God is there for us. We are not promised that everything on this earth will be free of difficulties, but we are promised that God will never leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5-6). This psalm can be of great comfort to us when things do not appear to be going too well. We can expect God's deliverance.
2. God hears and answers our cries. Sometimes we cry to God out of despair and wonder if He is really listening. The answer of this psalm is a resounding "yes." God hears and will deliver, even if we feel alone.
3. It is okay to express our desperate feelings to God. He wants us to cast our cares upon Him (1 Pet. 5:6-7).
4. Because of what God accomplished through Jesus, we are blessed beyond all of our imaginations. So now we can praise God, be satisfied, worship Him, and tell the coming generations what marvelous works He has performed. Because of what God has done, we have a great victory in Christ (Rom. 8:31ff).

I realize that not everyone will agree with my brief analysis of the phrase and the psalm. But I think that it is very inadequate to just look at the phrase as Jesus was on the cross and not give some consideration to the psalm from which it comes. The psalm seems so entirely messianic that we cannot overlook it in our interpretation of the phrase. I hope that these thoughts will encourage further study. ❀



Sermon Notes

Jesus in Hebrews

Introduction: The portrait of Jesus in Hebrews heightens our appreciation for who Christ is, what He has done, and why we should love Him all the more.

- I. Christ as God. ch. 1-2:4
- II. Christ as Man. ch. 2
- III. Christ as High Priest. ch. 3-8
- IV. Christ as the Perfect Sacrifice. ch. 9-10
- V. Exhortations to faithfulness based upon the perfection and faithfulness of Christ.

Chapters 10-13

1. Draw near to God. 10:22
2. Hold fast confession. 10:23
3. Encourage each other. 10:24-25
4. Avoid willfully turning away. 10:26-31
5. Remembrance of earlier days. 10:32ff
6. The faithful cloud of witnesses. 11
7. Fix eyes on Jesus. 12:1-3
8. Appreciate discipline. 12:4-11
9. Strengthen each other. 12:12-13
10. Pursue peace and holiness. 12:14-17
11. The greatness and glory of what we have come to in Christ. 12:18-29
12. General exhortations. 13:1-9
13. Go to where Christ is. 13:10-14
14. We must offer up sacrifice. 13:15-16

Conclusion: Hebrews 13:20-21

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