

## **“My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?”**

by Tim Haile

*“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”* Jesus spoke these words on the cross in quoting Psalm 22:1 (Matt. 27:46). Though several theories exist as to the meaning and possible implications of these words, there are two major positions: Either Jesus was describing an *actual* condition and consequence of his crucifixion, or he deliberately cited the opening line of Psalm 22 for the purpose of drawing attention to the prophecy that described the *actual perceptions and actions* of crucifixion spectators. Some teach that Jesus was actually “alone” and “forsaken” by God while he was on the cross. I disagree with this interpretation for a number of reasons:

1. If one claims that the Father actually “forsook” Jesus during the crucifixion, then he admits to a fracturing of the Godhood, which amounts to a denial of the very nature of God. Moses affirmed that “...*the Lord our God is one Lord*” (Deut. 6:4). The word for “God” is Elohim, which is the plural word for God. Plural pronouns are applied to this term in Genesis 1:26 and 3:22. Moses meant “one,” not in *number*, but in nature – a *united one*. This is exactly what Jesus meant in John 10:30 when he said, “*I and the Father are one.*” And just hours before his arrest, Jesus acknowledged that He and the Father were “one” (John 17:21, 22). Did this united condition change just a day later during Jesus’ time on the cross? Did the Godhead cease to be “one” for a certain period of time? A common response is to just say that, “we can’t understand it.” If so, we cannot understand the Bible, for it affirms that the multiple persons of God are a united ONE, and that God’s nature does not change (Mal. 3:6; Heb. 13:8).
2. Some claim that Matthew 27:46 means that the Father left Jesus “alone” during the crucifixion. It is said that the Father “abandoned” Jesus on the cross. It may have looked that way to the howling mob of crucifiers, but according to Jesus’ own words, the Father *never* left Him “alone.” Jesus told the apostles, “*Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come,*

*when you will be scattered each to his own home, and will leave Me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with Me*" (John 16:32). The apostles would abandon Jesus at some near future event. We know from Matthew 26:56 that this was at the crucifixion. But according to Jesus, He would not be alone at this time, for the Father would remain *with* Him. Using a present tense verb, Jesus described the Father as being with Him at the very time of the crucifixion. Jesus earlier said, *"And He Who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him"* (Jn. 8:29). Note that the time of the Father's *not leaving Christ alone* coincides with the time of Christ doing the Father's will. According to Philippians 2:8 this includes Christ's time on the cross, for Paul said that Christ was *"obedient to the point of death; even the death of the cross."* It is a mere fiction to believe that the Father "left" Christ "alone" on the cross. God, the Father and God, the Son were NEVER separated, for to be such would contradict their very nature.

3. Any *forsaking* of Jesus by the Father would necessarily imply some *reason* for such forsaking. The Father would not have "forsaken" Jesus for just no reason. Some people claim that the alleged forsaking of Jesus by the Father was the result of all of humanity's sins being placed upon Jesus at the cross. It is argued that Jesus became separated from the Father as a result of this sin. I have heard preachers work themselves into a frenzy in their effort to depict the crucified Christ as being "the blackest of all sinners" and asserting that the Father "turned his face away from Jesus" while he was on the cross. Interestingly, **they affirm the exact opposite of what the Psalmist affirmed**, for he stated that the Father *"has not hidden his face from him"* (Psalm 22:24). Herein lies the problem: brethren and others are not reading their Bibles. Some people rely too heavily upon the writings of Barnes, Clarke and others for their understanding of Matthew 27:46. This is dangerous, for Calvinism tainted their conclusions. The fact is, Scripture reveals only one reason why God would turn away from anyone, and that reason is SIN. If one asserts that the Father actually "forsook" Jesus on the cross, that reason would have to

- be on account of sin, whether sin *committed by* Jesus, or sin *assigned to* Jesus. There is simply no other possible reason for this alleged “forsaking” on the part of the Father.
4. By saying that God actually forsook Jesus on the cross, one lays the chief cornerstone of the Calvinistic system relating to sin and redemption. Calvin was wrong, but he was *consistently* wrong. That is, he accepted the logical implications and applications of his position. He believed that Jesus was *actually* forsaken on the cross, and he reasoned that this would have been due to someone’s sin, i.e., the sins of the world. This theory of sin/guilt/penal substitution was developed by Augustine and Anselm, then popularized and effectively propagated by John Calvin. The view is held by various people throughout denominationalism and Catholicism. Sadly, many brethren accept various tenets of Calvinism, including the notions of imputation and substitutionism. Unlike Calvin, few of these brethren actually accept the logical conclusions of their position, which temporarily protects them from greater errors. However, this should not be seen as a consolation, for error has a cancerous affect (2 Tim. 2:18). It tends to grow into something worse (2 Tim. 3:13). The need to be consistent eventually takes over, and people find themselves accepting all other related tenets that are implied by the beginning premise. The Calvinistic position is systemic. Like a house of cards, it stands provided that all individual cards are kept in place. Some brethren deny holding a Calvinistic view, but their position on “forsaking” leads them inexorably to the position of sin substitution with its far-reaching tentacles.
  5. To say that Jesus was actually claiming in Matthew 27:46 to be *forsaken* by the Father is to completely miss His purpose for citing the opening words of Psalm 22. Some people attempt to explain Matthew 27:46 in a vacuum. They are unaware of the statement’s origin. They know only that Jesus said, “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*” This failure to understand the historical context of the phrase results in certain misinterpretation. As we shall see later, Jesus used the words of Psalm 22:1 as a teaching device or as an “attention-getter.”

Jesus was not claiming to have been actually “forsaken” by God. Psalm 22 simply will not allow this interpretation.

- a. Matthew tells us that when Jesus quoted Psalm 22:1, he did so by “*crying with a loud voice*” (Matt. 27:46). Why in a loud voice? One speaks in a “loud” voice in order to attract attention to what he is saying. The sermon was Psalm 22, and the title of the sermon was the opening sentence of that Psalm. Interestingly, this sermon was not given by *exposition* of the text, but by a *demonstration* of that text. Psalm 22 was enacted at Golgotha. Informed observers would recognize the connection between Psalm 22 and various happenings at the crucifixion.
- b. Matthew also tells us that this loud statement was made “*at the ninth hour.*” This is significant, for the ninth hour was the hour of Christ’s *death*. This means that all cross-related prophecies were either already fulfilled, or were in the process of being fulfilled. For example, immediately before the Lord’s citation of Psalm 22:1 (Matt. 27:46), verses 39 and 43 had just described words and deeds that are mentioned in Psalm 22:7, 8. Of course, the Lord’s side was not pierced until after his death (Jn. 19:34), but he was still in the “lifted up” condition on the cross when this was done (Jn. 8:28; 12:32, 33).
- c. Some parts of Psalm 22 are purely prophetic (piercing of hands and feet, casting lots for garment, vs. 16-18). However, some parts have a dual application. Though David wrote of his own persecutions and hardships, the tenacious resolve and cruel intentions that characterized his enemies also characterized the enemies of Christ. Their enemies possessed similar attitudes, took similar actions and made similar accusations. David and Jesus were also in a similar circumstance with respect to public perception. This sets the stage for the opening sentence of Psalm 22, “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*”
  - As Absalom, Ahithophel and others conspired against David, the Jewish rulers conspired against

Christ. Both were in a similar circumstance: They were treated and *viewed* as mere criminals. The Jewish people held David in high esteem. By citing David's words in Psalm 22:1, Jesus called attention to David's circumstance, which was similar to His. As David appeared to have been "forsaken" by God, so Jesus appeared to be "forsaken" by God.

- Psalm 22:1 must be viewed in light of verse 24 of the same chapter. David said, *"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, He heard."* I have heard people try to explain Matthew 27:46 by saying that "the Father turned His face away from Christ" while he was on the cross. This is the exact opposite of what the Bible actually states! David said that God did not turn His face from the afflicted one. By citing Psalm 22, Jesus reminded the Jews of the fact that a person's mistreatment by others does not necessarily imply God's disapproval of that person.
- Psalm 22:6 provides a concise commentary for helping us with our interpretive approach to the words of Psalm 22:1 (those quoted by Christ in Matt. 27:46). David wrote, *"But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people."* Jesus was also reproached and despised. And how is a "reproached" and "despised" man viewed? As a "worm." Was Jesus really a "worm?" No, He was not a worm, but His predicament allowed His enemies to *view* Him as a worm. So to, Jesus was no more "forsaken" by God than was David. However, the crucifixion made Him *appear* to be forsaken by God.
- Psalm 22:8 says, *"He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue him; let him deliver him, since he delights*

*in him.*” These very words were uttered at the cross (Matt. 27:43). By loudly calling attention to the twenty-second Psalm, Jesus called attention to prophecies that foretold the very terms and expressions that were used by some crucifiers!

- Psalm 22:7 speaks of people “wagging their heads.” This is what people did at the cross (Matt. 27:39). By calling attention to Psalm 22, Jesus invited people to recall prophecies that spoke to their very actions.
- Psalm 22:16 prophesied the piercing of Jesus’ hands and feet. This was the Roman method of crucifixion, and it was used on Christ.
- Psalm 22:18 prophesied the casting of lots for Jesus’ garment. John 19:23 describes the fulfillment of this prophecy.

### **Conclusion**

By uttering the words, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,*” Jesus directed attention to the Psalm of David that described His present circumstance. Honest observers who even briefly paused to consider that Psalm, would have felt the crushing reality that they were witnessing its fulfillment before their very eyes. They were seeing the very enactment of Psalm 22. And indeed they did experience this crushing reality, for Luke 23:48 says that the whole crowd “beat their breasts” when they saw what was done. The beating of the breasts was a public sign of mourning (Isa. 32:12; *see with Zech. 12:10*). Jesus had told the Jews that they would recognize His divine identity once He was lifted up (Jn. 8:28), and Psalm 22 helped them to this conclusion.

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