

“Forsake Me Not, O Lord”

Matthew 27:46

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we gather again this Lenten evening, we continue our series on the Words of Jesus from the cross, and we come now to the fourth word from Matthew 27:46, where the Apostle writes, “And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’” With these words, as Jesus hangs bleeding and dying on the cross, He proclaims to the world that He is alone. The Father has turned away from Him, and left Him to die.

Jesus has taken the sin of every man, woman, and child, of all times and places unto Himself. He has made them as if they were His own sins, taken them as if He Himself committed them. Because of this, the Father in heaven no longer sees His Son, but only the sin which Christ has willingly accepted upon Him. This weight, this burden of guilt, is being carried by our Lord that He might redeem the world. He has done nothing to deserve this punishment, pain, and suffering. In fact, He has perfectly kept God’s Law and thus deserves only exaltation and praise.

And yet, He suffers, “stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted...” writes the prophet in Isaiah 53:4. What sorrow and grief was heaped upon Him in that moment, to be abandoned by God to die a death He did not deserve. That is our death, our punishment that He is suffering, and He does this willingly. What blessed love our Savior has for us! Indeed, He is the Son of God, but in this moment, He is sin. He became sin for us, and the punishment for sin is death. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” Christ is the righteousness of God, and by His taking all of our sin and suffering the abandonment we deserve, He has given us His righteousness by the great exchange.

And what an unfair exchange that is! We give nothing but the punishment of death, and receive in return only forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus. The Father’s forsaking of His Son is not because His Son has done wrong, but in order for Him to be the perfect sacrifice and fulfill all that He has come to do, He must be as if He is the one in the wrong. He truly has shouldered the burden of sin, not just representing it like the scapegoat of the Old Testament sacrificial system. He IS sin, and the almighty God cannot tolerate or accept sin in His presence. And so, He turns away from Jesus in this dark hour, leaving Him alone as he hangs upon that accursed tree.

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Lenten Vespers #4 (3/26/2025); Matthew 27:46; Christian Questions and Their Answers #12-14

And so, our Savior cries out, as we all might do in a moment of abandonment, and He asks God, why? How could this be happening to me? What have I done to deserve such treatment, to be abandoned by my God after a life of perfect service and keeping of the Law? Seems pretty reasonable don't you think? In our sufferings, usually out of fear and dread, we often ask God, why me? Why not someone else? Well, Jesus isn't asking why this isn't happening to someone else, for He knows it must be Him that dies for the sins of the world. But why must it happen in such a way that He has been separated from His God in heaven?

Jesus' cry is not one of fear or dread, but it is one of sincere confusion and lack of understanding. Even as God incarnate, the Son is kept in the dark from the Father's purpose of His suffering. This is not unheard of that Jesus would not have the full knowledge of the Father's intent. In Matthew 24:36, He says about the last day, "But concerning that day, and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." And so, in the darkness of Golgotha, Jesus cries out in question of His God that He would bring the knowledge of why His suffering is happening in such a way. Jesus, in His humanity, seeks answers from our God, just as we often do in times of struggle and strife.

This word of Jesus is a difficult saying for many. We teach the unity of the Trinity and hold to the truth of that doctrine, and that doctrine stands firm even in this moment where Jesus seems to be separated from God. He is still the very Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. He has to be in order to bear the weight of the sin that has been heaped upon Him. No one else has that power. And He has to be scorned by His Father in order that the payment for sin would be satisfied, because our righteous God cannot tolerate sin. In the same token, Jesus must be fully man that He might die and pay the full debt that is owed to our righteous God. God demands payment for sin, and Jesus pays that on our behalf in absorbing our sins and removing the curse of that sin from our heads.

His unity with the Father still stands. His words from John 10:30, "I and the Father are one," are still true. In this moment of forsaking, He does not become only human and lose His divinity. They are still united as God of very God, but having become sin for our sakes He MUST be rejected and forsaken in the eyes of our just God. It is important to note that Jesus would usually speak directly to the Father, but here He says "My God." He is speaking on our behalf, as the sacrificial Lamb who has become our substitute. He bears the sin of the whole world, and asks a loving God why this is happening. As the weight of sin presses down on Him, He looks to God for answers,

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because that is where the solution lies, in the loving and undeserved kindness of our merciful God. This balance of justice and mercy from our God is best understood in our definition of who God is, which we receive from God Himself in Exodus 34:6-7, and it really helps us in our understanding of what is happening to our Lord on the cross. Moses records the words of Yahweh, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty...”

“Abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...forgiving...but who will by no means clear the guilty.” Christ Jesus, abounding in steadfast love has gone to the cross to be the propitiation for our sins, that we might receive the forgiveness and loving kindness of our merciful God and Lord. But the Father cannot clear the guilty, and in this moment of scorn and dread as Jesus hangs upon that cross of shame, He is the guilty one—the only guilty one. It is He alone who bears the punishment that He does not deserve but has willingly taken for our sakes. He must be forsaken and abandoned by God so that we might never be abandoned, that we might always be forgiven and loved by God for the sake of Christ.

In that moment of being forsaken by God, Our Lord and Savior Himself knows not the reason for His suffering in His darkest hour. It is hidden from Him as He is fully subject to God’s righteous wrath. Just as Christ died once for all, the Father forsook His Son once for all, as the bearer of all sin. But as we will see in the coming final words of Jesus, the Father has not abandoned Him for good, and neither will He ever abandon us who are in the faith. We cry out, as the Psalmist proclaims in Psalm 27:9, “Hide not Your face from me. Turn not Your servant away in anger, O You who have been my help. Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation!” Or, as the beautiful hymn “Lord Thee I Love with All My Heart” closes its first verse, “My God and Lord, Forsake me not! I trust Thy Word!”

There will certainly be times in our lives when we do not understand our sufferings in the throes of the devil’s attacks and our battles against him. But our loving God has promised in His Word that He has delivered us from sin and every evil by the blood of Jesus. And in that blessed Word we find the comfort that we need to press on in life toward the goal of eternity in heaven. That goal is our promised inheritance for the sake of Jesus Christ, who will never forsake those who have faith in Him, or let us fall into the desolation of hell. He will sustain us by His blood, and for His sufferings He has granted us the declaration that we are forever justified. The punishment is satisfied, so

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that we may live forever in the loving presence of our heavenly Father, who, because of His Son, will never forsake you. Amen.