

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church

Sermon Summary #51

The Cross and the Cry of Abandonment Mark 15:33-41

Not too long ago a book was published with the title: *What was God doing on the Cross?* It appears that there are two questions being asked, not one. First, "What was **God** doing on the cross?" Why was the God-man impaled on a Roman gibbet? It seems shocking that **God** should be crucified? Second, "What was God **doing** on the cross?" Once we've agreed that the God-man was on the cross, we wonder, "what was he **doing** there?" What was he accomplishing? To what end and for what purpose was Jesus, the God-man, suffering?

The problem is that there are growing numbers of Christians who are having an increasingly difficult time answering that question! The reason for this is three-fold: (1) a diminishing sense of God's holiness; (2) a diminishing sense of mankind's sinfulness; and (3) an inordinately increasing sense of self-worth. Whereas I affirm the need for a proper self-image, I fear that many are fast becoming so impressed with themselves that they can't help but wonder why Jesus had to die for them at all! But when we look at the Scriptures (Romans 3 would be a good place to begin), we realize that the **God-man, Jesus**, was on the cross **suffering the eternal penalty we deserved** because of the infinity of God's holiness and the depths of our depravity. We must keep this in mind or what we are about to read in Mark's gospel will make no sense at all.

The descent of darkness

There is a 3-fold significance to the "darkness" (v. 33) that enveloped the land of Palestine. (1) It reminds us of Amos 8:9-10 and thus symbolizes judgment on both the land and the people of Israel (note the "land", not the "earth"). (2) It reflects the fact that Jesus' sufferings have cosmic implications (cf. Col. 1:16-20). (3) Most important of all, darkness in the physical realm symbolizes darkness in the spiritual realm; more specifically, the darkness of the sky is a visible portrayal of the darkness in Christ's soul as he suffers for sinners.

How did it happen? (1) Some say it was an *eclipse* (see Lk. 23:44-45). But the text gives no support for this view. Moreover, solar eclipses do not occur when there is a full moon at Passover. We must be careful not to read our technical astronomical terminology back into words that in the first century may not have carried that force. Also, could an eclipse have lasted for three hours? (2) Others say it was a mid-day thunderstorm. But would a thunderstorm have covered "all the land"? Would a mere thunderstorm have evoked anything but passing notice? (3) Some suggest it was the *sirocco*, the hot dusty wind from the desert that occasionally would sweep across Palestine. But the sirocco was not known to cause darkness with the intensity described here. (4) More than likely this darkness is to be understood as a *miraculous intervention* by God. Whether or not he employed some natural phenomenon is unclear.

The cry of dereliction

It was common for crucifixions to be accompanied by screams of rage and anguish, loud cursing and shouts of despair by the victim. But this cry (v. 34), no doubt, was not so much because of the physical pain, as horrific and profound as it was, but because of the abandonment of the Son by the Father.

We have seen intense physical abuse inflicted on Jesus up to this point: his beating at the hands of the soldiers who arrested him; the crown of thorns on his head and being beaten with a rod; his scourging by Pilate's military guard. But nothing done to his body by men can compare with what is done to his soul by God. It is one thing to feel the lash of the soldier's whip on one's back. It is altogether something else to feel the lash of divine wrath in one's soul.

Some are offended by Jesus' cry of abandonment and have tried to explain it in a variety of ways.

(1) Some point to the Jewish principle according to which quoting the first verse of a psalm implies the whole psalm. Since Psalm 22 ends with triumph and serenity we must conclude that Jesus' cry is not one of dereliction but one of faith. However, even if we concede that Jesus had in mind all of Psalm 22, vindication comes only with the resurrection in Mark 16, not with the crucifixion in Mark 15. Jesus' cry expresses agony and suffering, not confidence.

(2) Others argue that it was customary for dying men to cry out with Scripture on their lips. But why *this* psalm? Why *this* verse? If he were merely dying a death common to all men, why not some psalm and some verse more appropriate (such as Ps. 23:1)?

(3) Some suggest that Jesus only *felt* forsaken of God but in *fact* was not. This often happens with us. When things go badly we all too quickly conclude that God has abandoned us, when nothing could be further from the truth. But could Jesus have been mistaken about something so fundamental as his relationship to the Father? Could Jesus have been confused about the meaning of that one event for which he knew he had been sent into the world? If anyone knew the difference between fact and fantasy, it was Jesus.

(4) Some appeal to psychological explanations: suppressed doubts and fears and anxieties break forth from his sub-conscious due to a semi-deranged mental condition.

None of these explanations is credible. The answer is to be found in the four principal parts of our Lord's cry.

1. Here Jesus refers to God as "**God**", not "Father". Yet Jesus always referred to God as his Father in the gospels. In all other 21 instances when he prays he addresses God as Father. Indeed, earlier on the cross Jesus had said, "**Father**, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34). Later he will say, "**Father**, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Lk. 23:46). So why the difference? The answer must be that now Jesus knows the relationship is *not paternal but judicial*. Jesus sees himself not principally as God's Son but as sin's sacrifice. In this one indescribably horrific moment, judgment, not intimacy, characterized the relationship of Jesus and God the Father.

2. Notwithstanding the first point, note that Jesus refers to him as "**my** God." He doesn't say, "Oh, God; oh, God," but rather "**my** God; **my**, God!" Jesus does not die renouncing God, but reaching out to him. It is as if when the Father pulls away, Jesus clings to him, saying: "You are still **my** God!" It is a cry of distress, but not of distrust. It is an expression of personal desolation, but not of rebellion. Though suffering for sins he himself never committed, he ever entrusts himself to God.

3. Note the interrogative "**why?**". This is not a question of unbelief, but a desire for information. His manhood was searching for a reasonable explanation for this abandonment. The

"why" also implies a conscious innocence on the part of Jesus. As far as his moral being was concerned, he knew of no basis on which the Father might forsake him. It is an inquiry concerning the grounds upon which he is condemned, for nothing in himself deserved such treatment (cf. John 5:19-20; 6:38; 8:28-29). He is forsaken, but not for his own sins. See 2 Cor. 5:21.

"To be forsaken of God was *much more a source of anguish to Jesus than it would be to us*. 'Oh,' say you, 'how is that?' I answer, because he was perfectly holy. A rupture between a perfectly holy being and the thrice holy God must be in the highest degree strange, abnormal, perplexing, and painful" (Spurgeon, 539).

4. Finally, what could it possibly mean to say that God the Father "forsook" or "abandoned" Jesus? There are several factors to consider.

- Consider how the loneliness and isolation of Jesus has progressively increased: huge crowds initially followed him, often forcing him to retreat ----- the crowds soon left him, once they grasped the meaning of what he said (John 6) ----- soon, only 12 followed closely ----- eventually, the 12 became 11 (Judas betrayed him) ----- eventually, the 11 became 1 (Peter) ----- eventually, even Peter abandoned him ----- but he could always count on the Father to be there ----- but eventually even the Father turned away ----- "You! I can understand why everyone else has left. But why you?"
- "It is not the way of God," notes Spurgeon, "to leave either his sons or his servants. His saints, when they come to die, in their great weakness and pain, find him near. They are made to sing because of the presence of God. . . . Dying saints have clear visions of the living God" (537). Yet here we see that he forsook his Son in the hour of his weakness, in the moment of his greatest need, at the time of his impending death.
- Let us also remember that this forsaking was utterly singular and unprecedented in the experience of Jesus. Never before had he known anything remotely similar to this that might have prepared him for it. "He lived in constant touch with God. His fellowship with the Father was always near and dear and clear; but now, for the first time, he cries, 'why hast thou forsaken me?' . . . His Father now dried up that sacred stream of peaceful communion and loving fellowship which had flowed hitherto throughout his whole earthly life. . . . [Thus] to be forsaken was a new grief to him. He had never known what the dark was till then; his life had been lived in the light of God" (Spurgeon, 537-39).
- "Our Lord's heart, and all his nature were, morally and spiritually, so delicately formed, so sensitive, so tender, that to be without God, was to him a grief which could not be weighed" (Spurgeon, 540).

Let's think more deeply about the depths of loneliness that Jesus experienced in that moment of abandonment by his Father.

When I was in the first week of the first grade, at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School in Shawnee, I suffered an extremely serious broken left arm. After a few days in the hospital in Shawnee I was transferred to St. Anthony's here in OKC where I spent three weeks in traction. I

was only 6½ years old, but I remember it today as vividly as if it were yesterday. It was my first encounter with loneliness.

I will never forget what happened just before my dad left and drove back home to Shawnee. He took me into the public restroom, hoping to find some privacy. I remember him looking under the stall doors to see if anyone was present. Seeing that we were alone, we went into one of the stalls and I stood on the toilet seat as he took me in his arms and hugged me so tightly I thought I couldn't breathe. We cried in each other's arms, as this was the first time I would ever spend a night in his absence.

When we finished, he took me back to the children's ward and left me there with a dozen or more kids my own age. I was surrounded by noise that night, but I was lonely. I was attended to by nurses, but I was lonely. I was in the company of a dozen or more other children, but I was lonely.

But the loneliness was not because I felt abandoned by my father. It wasn't because I was the object of his anger or disappointment. As deep and agonizing and heart-breaking as was my loneliness, it was nothing to be compared with what the Son of God felt when his Heavenly Father turned his back, turned away his face, and forsook his only-begotten.

Loneliness is not picky or discriminating. At some time or another it strikes everyone.

- The widow (who suddenly finds herself without the companion with whom she shared so many years)
- The divorcee
- The parents facing an empty nest after the children are grown
- The empty mailbox
- The telephone that never rings
- The long days and forgotten nights
- The forgotten birthday

The cry of loneliness is all too common in our world:

- In the nursing home, as days pass without a visitor
- In the prison, where no one can be trusted
- In the perfectly manicured homes of suburban America, where everyone smiles, dresses sharply, and on the outside at least looks to be happy

Without for a moment wanting to minimize the pain of loneliness that we all at times feel, nothing has ever compared with the eternal loneliness experienced by Jesus. The most horrifying cry of loneliness ever heard came not from a prisoner or an elderly widow or from a six-year-old boy with a broken arm. It came from the cross, from the lips of a sinless savior named Jesus: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

There must be a reason why a holy and righteous God would forsake the only good man who ever lived. There must be a reason why God would injure the only innocent man who ever lived. Why did Jesus react to *his* sufferings in this way whereas others face death without so much as a whimper? The answer is found in Isaiah 53.

"Bearing shame and scoffing rude,

In my place condemned he stood;
Sealed my pardon with his blood,
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Guilty, vile and helpless we;
Spotless Lamb of God was he;
'Full atonement' can it be?
Hallelujah! What a Savior!"

The only explanation that makes sense of the cry of dereliction is the imputation to Jesus of the guilt of sinners and his consequent experience of the wrath of Almighty God. In our place, as our substitute, Jesus endured and exhausted in his own soul the penal judgment which our sin required. Hereby was God's holy nature *propitiated* (1 John 2:1-2) or satisfied, and we were set free! Spurgeon suggests that the Father may have said to the Son something like this:

"My Son, I forsake thee because thou standest in the sinner's stead. As thou art holy, just, and true, I never would forsake thee; I would never turn away from thee; . . . but on thy head doth rest the guilt of every penitent, transferred from him to thee; and thou must expiate it by thy blood. Because thou standest in the sinner's stead, I will not look at thee till thou hast borne the full weight of my vengeance" (495-96).

Despite the horribly painful sufferings Jesus endured physically, the spiritual and mental anguish of this moment must have been worse. As Spurgeon explains,

"Grief of mind is harder to bear than pain of body. You can pluck up courage and endure the pang of sickness and pain, so long as the spirit is hale and brave; but if the soul itself be touched, and the mind becomes diseased with anguish, then every pain is increased in severity, and there is nothing with which to sustain it. Spiritual sorrows are the worst of mental miseries. A man may bear great depression of spirit about worldly matters, if he feels that he has his God to go to. He is cast down, but not in despair. . . . But if the Lord be once withdrawn, if the comfortable light of his presence be shadowed even for an hour, there is a torment within the breast, which I can only liken to the prelude of hell. . . . We can bear a bleeding body, and even a wounded spirit; but a soul conscious of desertion by God is beyond conception unendurable" (536).

How, then, shall we respond? Said Spurgeon: *"let us abhor the sin which brought such agony upon our beloved Lord.* What an accursed thing is sin, which crucified the Lord Jesus! Do you laugh at it? Will you go and spend an evening to see a mimic performance of it? Do you roll sin under your tongue as a sweet morsel, and then come to God's house, on the Lord's-day morning, and think to worship him? . . . Sin murdered Christ; will you be a friend to it? Sin pierced the heart of the Incarnate God; can you love it?" (545-46)

Elijah?

Why did some believe he was calling out to Elijah (v. 35)? First of all, it would have been easy for someone to mistake his appeal to God in the words, "Eli, Eli," with a call to "Elijah." Second, according to 2 Kings 2:1-12, Elijah didn't die but was taken alive to heaven in a whirlwind. Ancient Jewish tradition held that he would come and rescue the righteous in their distress.

In the OT (Num. 6:13; Ruth 2:14), sour wine and vinegar (v. 36) were a refreshing, thirst-quenching drink. Was this an act of mercy or mockery; of compassion or cruelty? Again, it was probably an act of cruelty, designed to prolong his conscious life and thus his agony.

Jesus breathed his last

This cry (v. 37) is probably a reference to the 6th of our Lord's 7 utterances on the cross. According to John, this cry consisted of the words, "It is finished" (19:30). It was "not the gasp of a worn-out, disintegrated life, but an exultant expression of the supreme spiritual joy of the completion of His divinely determined work" (S. L. Johnson). It is at this moment that Jesus voluntarily relinquishes his struggle for life. Even in death he is yet in control. He gave his life willingly and lovingly." The work of redemption is done.

The tearing of the temple veil

There were two veils in the Temple, one separating the outer court from the Holy Place, and one separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. Surely it was the second of these that was torn (v. 38). This was the veil that separated all men from God and barred entrance into the Holy of Holies. This was the veil through which only the high priest could pass once a year. It was massive: 60 ft. long, 30 ft. high, and 1 inch thick. Ancient sources tell us that it took 100 priests to put it in place.

How did this happen? I have no doubt but that God reached down and shred it in two with no less power and glory than when he divided the waters of the Red Sea!

What was the symbolic significance of this rending of the veil? Surely three things: (1) It points to the complete, perfect, and altogether sufficient sacrifice for sins that Jesus has offered in himself on the cross. The sin that had created a barrier both spiritually and naturally between God and man has been atoned for. (2) It also points to the end of the Mosaic Covenant and its laws, which have been fulfilled in Christ. The "old order" has passed away! 3) It points to the fact that God in all his glory is now freely and fully accessible to all men and women who come to him by faith in Jesus Christ. For centuries before the coming of Christ, God had confined the revelation of his glory and majesty to the Holy of Holies. Now he bursts forth to dwell no longer behind a veil in a house built with wood and stone and precious jewels, but to dwell in the hearts of his people. See Hebrews 10:19-22.

Response?

Until now Jesus has been the object of scorn and ridicule and mockery. What the Jewish leaders have denied and the Roman rulers have mocked, this lone centurion now sees with pristine spiritual clarity. The centurion (v. 39) was most likely the Roman officer in charge of overseeing the crucifixion. He was accustomed to executions like this, but what he saw and heard in the case of Jesus led him to conclude that this was no ordinary man: "Truly this man was the Son of God!" What it was in the way Jesus suffered and died that awakened faith in him we cannot know.

Concluding paradoxes:

- (1) We know that at the cross God was *hostile* toward us and punished Jesus in our stead. Yet we also know that at the cross God was *loving* us, so much so that he gave his only begotten Son.

(2) We know that our great Triune God is immutable and that the union between Father, Son, and Spirit is unbreakable. Yet we also know that on the cross hung God the Son, forsaken by God the Father.

(3) We know that God is the essence of all life. He is its source and sustainer. Yet we also know that somehow at Calvary the God-man, Jesus, *died*.

(4) We know that God is infinitely righteous, pure, and holy, in whom there is no defect and of whom nothing evil can be said. Yet we also know that God "made him who knew no sin *to be sin* on our behalf" (2 Cor. 5:21).

Paul said it clearly and confidently in his letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 35-39 . . . Why was he so dogmatic? There is only one reason: we shall never be separated from the love of God because Jesus, in our place, was separated and forsaken and suffered the wrath we deserved.

Probably all of you here today have experienced some season of loneliness. You may be immersed in it right now. But as painful and depressing as it may be, of this you may be absolutely certain. Your heavenly Father will *never, by no means ever* turn his back on you. He will *never, by no means ever* turn away his face. He will *never, by no means ever* forsake you. How can you be so sure? Look to the cross. The only God-forsakenness that you ever had cause to fear was endured to an infinite and immeasurable degree by your Lord and Savior, Jesus.