

“Forsaken” - Matthew 27:45-54

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on April 9, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bible's to Matthew 27.
- The reason the average person on the street cares so little about Jesus Christ is because they have never understood and been captivated by grace. The reason why so many Christians seem unchanged in their behaviour and lack a deep love for God is because, although they understand grace, they are not captivated by it.
 - To understand and be captivated by grace we must appreciate two things: First we must know deep in our souls the size of debt we owe to God. Second, we must know deep in our souls the magnitude of God's provision to pay that debt on our behalf.
- Think of it this way. Suppose I come home one day and you say, ***“Oh, while you were out someone came to the door with an overdue bill for you. I paid it on your behalf. Don't worry about paying me back. It's all taken care of.”*** How should I respond to you? That is a difficult question because my response will be directly determined by the size of the bill you paid for me.
 - If it was the UPS guy and I owed a \$4.50 delivery charge I would probably just give you a polite thank you and we'd go on with life. But what if it was the police and agents from Revenue Canada – what if they were there to imprison me because I owed millions of dollars of debt? What if you wrote out a cheque and paid it on my behalf? In that case I would fall on my knees at your feet and with tears flowing from my eyes express my deepest gratitude. That would change my life.
 - The reason why people care so little about Jesus is because they have never understood the colossal size of the debt they owe God. If they did, they would run to Jesus saying, ***“Can you help me? Can you save me?”*** And when Jesus said, ***“I can pay it in full”***, they would fall at his feet in gratitude and their entire life would be transformed by such an act of grace.
- To understand grace we must understand the size of the debt and the magnitude of the provision. In order that we might be captivated by God's grace, come with me this morning to Golgotha. Come and behold what Jesus did to rescue sinners.
 - Come with me to the darkest moment in history, to words that will implode our deepest thoughts, to a moment in time where we simultaneously behold the horrors of hell and the supreme love of the Saviour.

DARKNESS AND THE CRY OF DERELICTION

- Look with me at Mt 27. In the Bible hundreds of years of history can pass with little or no comment and yet when it comes to the last hours of Jesus' life every gospel writer slows time down to the point of giving a real time description of each word and event. Why?
 - To magnify the significance of what is said and done.
- Around 3:00pm Jesus reaches the culminating point of his anguish. As the land is covered in supernatural darkness Matthew tells us that Jesus cried out in a loud voice, **READ 46 - *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?***
 - There is no sentence in all of history that is filled with such anguish as this one, which has been called, ***“The cry of dereliction, the cry of abandonment and desertion.”***

- Friends, we are treading on holy ground here. We are at the very centre of the meaning of the death of Christ. We are about to enter territory that the human mind cannot fully conceive. I confess to you that I cannot fully explain this. All I can do today is to walk you up to the edge of the precipice and help you look over the edge into the bottomless chasm of these words.
 - As you look over the edge you will see thick darkness – the darkness of hell itself but you will also see bright beams of light piercing the darkness – the beams of Christ’s love for sinners.
 - Who can grasp the full significance of this? This morning we will adore what we cannot fully comprehend.

WRONG VIEWS OF THE CRY OF DERELICTION

- So let me walk you towards the precipice that you may gaze into the depths of salvation. I want to do this by asking four questions about this cry of abandonment.
 - First, **(SHOW SLIDE 2) “Was Jesus really forsaken of God on the cross?”**
- Let me give you three viewpoints that I think miss the point of this saying. First, liberal scholars have said this cry really means that Jesus has lost his faith in God.
 - Liberal scholars have argued that Jesus never expected his mission to fail and end in death. Since God has not rescued him, his faith in God has failed and he is disillusioned and dismayed. One liberal scholar writes that these words are **“among the most pathetic ever uttered in the annals of history.”**¹
 - This view totally fails to take into account the fact that the death of Christ was planned from the creation of the world and that Jesus himself viewed his destiny as dying on a cross. Moreover, this is not a scream of despair; it is a anguished cry of trust. He says, **“my God, my God.”** In his anguish, he runs to God in prayer, not away in unbelief.
- Others have said that Jesus thinks he is *actually* forsaken but in reality he simply *feels* forsaken.
 - This is one step closer to the truth. Certainly Jesus is experiencing feelings of abandonment. But are we to agree with one commentator who says, **“There never was an utterance that reveals more amazingly the distance between feeling and fact?”**² Are we really saying that Jesus misread the situation, that he was not really forsaken but only felt it? I don’t think so. He cries out like this because the feelings reflect reality.
- One final interpretation that is quite popular is to say that this is *not* actually a cry of abandonment. It is rather, a cry of *triumph*.
 - The argument goes like this: Jesus is quoting Psalm 22:1. It was Jewish practice to cite the first verse of a psalm and in so doing imply the whole psalm. Now Psalm 22 begins with an account of suffering but ends with great confidence and triumph.
 - So in this view, Jesus is not really crying out in despair but in triumph.
 - This sounds ingenious but it simply does not work because in the first place no one hearing this would have thought of triumph. Secondly, if Jesus wanted to declare triumph why not quote the last verses of Ps 22 or any one of the thousand other verses of triumph in the OT? But finally, this view fails to see Matthew’s developing theme of Jesus’ rejection.

¹ E. Rivkin, *What crucified Jesus?*, 108.

² T.R. Glover, *Jesus of History*, 192. Cited in Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 80.

- In chapter 13 Jesus is abandoned by his country. In chapter 26 he is abandoned by his disciples. In chapter 27 he is abandoned by the crowds and as I hope to show you this is the ultimate rejection.³
- Let us not blunt the edge of these words. Let us take them in their simple and straightforward manner as a real cry of dereliction, of abandonment and desertion. Jesus feels abandoned because He is abandoned.
 - In answer to the first question we could very simply say, **(SHOW SLIDE 3) On the cross, Jesus was actually forsaken by God.**

WHAT MUST IT HAVE BEEN LIKE?

- Before we move on the 19th century preacher, Charles Spurgeon, asks us to pause and consider what a terrible thing this must have been. You may experience great misery but at least you have God to go to. You may be deserted by spouse, family, or friend but God is still there. You may feel forsaken but you gain hope as you recall the scripture where God says to you, ***“Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.”***⁴ We are never really alone no matter how we feel.
 - What must it have been like then for Jesus in his great distress to find himself all alone, not just abandoned by his disciples but to see the face of God turned away from him? ***“My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”***
- The depths of this grief are magnified when we consider the unbroken fellowship and communion Jesus enjoyed with his Father throughout his life. At his baptism and his transfiguration the Father spoke from heaven and said, ***“This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”***⁵
 - And now he experiences for the first time what it means to lose that fellowship. He had never known such darkness and all he can do is cry out, ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”***
- Furthermore in all the tortures of his body he had remained silent. He had quietly dealt with being forsaken by country, disciples, and crowds. Never does he ask, ***“Judas, why have you forsaken me?”*** or ***“Peter, why have you forsaken me?”***
 - These hurt him but the piercing blow came in the darkness of the cross. ***“God, why have you forsaken me?”***
- This is even more remarkable when we consider that this is *not* the way God deals with his people in distress and death. The saint cries out, ***“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me.”***
 - Not so with the Jesus. In the Garden, when he asked if there was any other way but the cross, all he heard was this.....silence. When the hour of trial came, He was forsaken of God. No strength is given to him. He is all alone. The smile of God is hidden. ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”***
- But how are we to understand this? Are we saying here though that God forsook God? Are we saying that for a short time the Trinity became a Duality? Certainly not! God the Son was never separated in essence from God the Father or God the Spirit. Most theologians say this has to do with the human nature of Jesus being forsaken. But how are we to comprehend this?
 - I told you I could only lead you to look into the vast abyss of these words. I leave it at this sober fact: **on the cross Jesus was actually forsaken by God.**

³ Country 13:53-8; Disciples 26:56, 69-75; Crowds 27:15-26.

⁴ Hebrews 13:5.

⁵ Matthew 3:17; 17:5.

WHAT WAS THE CAUSE OF HIS ABANDONMENT?

- Let us now ask a second question: **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** *“what possible cause did God have in forsaking Jesus?”*
 - There are those who say that Jesus could not figure it out either and that is why He is asking the question. But was Jesus really ignorant of the cause?
 - Of course not. Jesus not only knew that He was going to die, but he also knew what he was going to face on the cross that would cause him to be forsaken of God.
- Turn back with me to Matthew 26. **READ 36-42**
 - *Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.” And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”*
- Behold the grief of the Saviour. He is so distressed Luke tells us that blood mingles with his sweat. But what is it that pushes him to edge of his sanity?
 - Is it the whipping he will face? The mockery? The nails that would be driven through his hands and feet? Surely that is part of it but that is not the heart of the cross. The heart of what Jesus fears cannot be expressed in any painting, sculpture, or movie.
 - What is it? Answer: He must drink the cup. The cup dominates his mind and heart. In the garden Jesus is looking at this cup and he is shaking in terror.
- What is the meaning of the cup? This is OT imagery and it has only one meaning. Listen to Jeremiah 25. **READ 15-16** - *Thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: “Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them.”*
 - What is in this cup that just thinking about drinking it makes Jesus almost die? What is in this cup that causes Jesus to stagger and literally collapse as he contemplates drinking it?
 - The cup is filled with the wrath of God against human sin. Drinking the cup is the metaphorical way of saying that a person must face the full force of God’s judgement. As Jesus stares into the cup he is contemplating what lies before him. He must drink the cup and when he does he will become the object of God’s wrath. The sword of God’s judgement will strike him down with full force.
- But this makes no sense. If the cup is God’s wrath against sin and Jesus has never sinned, why would he have to drink the cup? The answer to that question is the great theme of scripture.
 - Jesus was not drinking the cup because of his own sins. Jesus was drinking the cup of our sins. God wrung out every drop of his judgement against sinners, not into individual cups for each person to drink, but into one cup. At the cross, he gave that cup to His Son to drink. He did not force him to drink it. Jesus voluntarily drank it to the very last drop.

- The physical sufferings of the cross were terrible but it is the cup that causes Jesus to shudder in terror. While on the cross Paul says, **“God made him who had no sin, to be sin for us.”**⁶ Isaiah speaks in the same language of substitution. **“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him ...The LORD laid on him the iniquity of us all.”**⁷
 - In that moment Jesus is still the holy Son of God, and yet in some other sense as the representative of his people He is the essence of all wickedness. Having been made sin the holy God turns his face away from Jesus. God turns his back on Jesus and removes Himself from Him.
- So in answer to the question, **“what possible cause did God have in forsaking Jesus?”** we answer, **(SHOW SLIDE 5) Jesus was forsaken because God ‘made him to be sin for us’.** He was forsaken because he stood in our place.
 - And being crushed under this punishment, he cries out, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**

HELL ON EARTH

- But that leads us to ask the next question: **(SHOW SLIDE 6) why precisely did Jesus have to be forsaken in order to save us?**
 - Everywhere the scriptures show us that our sin separates us from God. When Adam and Eve sinned they were driven out of the Garden - excluded from the presence of God. In the temple a great curtain separated God’s presence from the people. So also, we read that on Judgement Day all those who refuse to call upon Jesus to save them will hear those terrible words, **“Depart from me.”** And 2 Thes 1:9 says, **“They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.”**
 - So human sin results in being excluded from the presence of God – the worst feature of hell is that a person is forsaken by God.
- Why precisely did Jesus have to be forsaken in order to save us? **(SHOW SLIDE 7) The consequence of sin is being eternally forsaken by God in hell. Therefore, in order to rescue us, Jesus took our place and endured being forsaken by God.**
 - Oh stare down into the abyss of these words. Jesus literally endures hell on earth. As the representative for sinners, Jesus is made to be sin. Having been made sin he faces the full judgement of God on sinners and is cut off from God, abandoned by God, rejected by God. He is God-forsaken.
 - In the horror of that moment Jesus quoted the only verse of scripture that accurately described his anguished state: **“My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”**

FORSAKEN THAT NO SINNER MIGHT BE FORSAKEN

- Having seen the darkness that the Saviour underwent now let us look into the abyss of these words and see the glorious light that blazes up at us.
 - Let me show you the light by asking this question: **(SHOW SLIDE 8) What meaning is there for us in Jesus’ God-forsaken cry?** Three things.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 9) First, Jesus’ cry reveals what we deserve for our sins.**

⁶ II Corinthians 5:21.

⁷ Isaiah 53:5-6.

- Sin is no small thing. Sin is not something to be laughed about and neither is it some \$4.50 debt that is easily paid. The Son of God had his body and soul ripped to shreds over our sin. Hell is the consequence of sin. The biggest question you must answer is, ***“How can I escape the horrific judgement that is due to me for my sin?”*** What terror to have to drink the cup that is due to you for your sin.
 - Jesus’ cry reveals what we deserve for our sins.
- In the second place though Jesus’ words provides great joy and meaning for us. How so? Bible scholar D.A. Carson put me onto what is perhaps the best four-line commentary on this passage that was ever written. It was written in the 19th century by a poet named Elizabeth Browning. Browning wrote a three page poem entitled, ***“On Cowper’s Grave.”***
 - The reference is to William Cowper who was a prolific hymn writer, brilliant literary critic, and close friend of John Newton (the author of *Amazing Grace*). One of Cowper’s famous hymns that you know is ***“There is a fountain filled with blood.”*** What you may not know is that besides writing hymns Cowper was a scholar. His essays were widely sought after in the learned circles of Europe and were standard reading at places such as Oxford and Cambridge.
 - You also may not know that he was a man who sunk into the deepest depths of depression. Four times in his life he was institutionalized for long periods of time and tried to commit suicide.
 - A century after his death Browning picked up her pen to write. She reflects on Cowper’s brilliance as a scholar. She then moves on to extol his hymns and how he taught the church to sing. Then she alludes to his depression and then right at the end Browning writes in reference to this passage,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 10) *“Yea, once Immanuel’s orphaned cry His universe hath shaken - It went up single, echoless, “My God, I am forsaken.” It went up from the Holy’s lips amid his lost creation, That, of the lost, no son should cry those words of desolation.”***
 - That of the lost, no son should cry those words of desolation.
 - Do you see the point? As Carson puts it, Jesus cries this abysmal cry so that for all eternity William Cowper might never have to cry it. Jesus cries this abysmal cry so that Barton Priebe may never have to cry this...not ever!
 - **What meaning is there for us in Jesus’ God-forsaken cry?** All the meaning in the universe! **(SHOW SLIDE 11) Jesus was forsaken of God, that no sinner might ever have to know what it means to be God-forsaken.**
 - Oh the glory of the Saviour! Oh the depths of his sufferings! This cry reveals the depth of the love of God for sinners! Jesus was forsaken of God. For me he drank that cup! For me he was forsaken!
 - As one man has said, Jesus had every right in that moment in the garden to look at you and scream, ***“This is your cup. You’re responsible for this. It’s your sin. You drink it.”***⁸ But Jesus freely took the cup from your hand and said, ***“I drink this for you.”***
 - For me his anguished cry went up so that even after billions of eons I might never know what it means to cry, ***“Why have you forsaken me?”***
 - He did this for you and for me. Will you receive this gift from him today? He offers himself to you.
 - Friends, we have only peered a few hundred feet down into the depths of this cry but I pray you have seen the glory of the Saviour – a great Saviour, an all sufficient Saviour, who endured being forsaken of God, who endured hell for us, ***“that, of the lost, no son should cry those words of desolation.”***

⁸ C.J. Mahaney, *The Cross-centered Life*, 82.