

Series: The Seven Sayings of the Cross, Part 5

Title: “My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?”

Text: Mark 15:34

Date: March 13, 2022

Last words are often regarded as being important. As a pastor, I have had the firsthand opportunity to see how meaningful one’s final words can be. Many times, the last things a loved one says provide great comfort for family and friends. History books are replete with examples.

The story has been told of the final breaths of Harriet Tubman, the American heroine who escaped slavery and led others to freedom. It is believed that she liberated around seventy others through her famous “Underground Railroad.” As death drew near in 1913, her family gathered together. In concert, they all sang, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” as she passed. Tubman sang until she was no longer able. The scene was undoubtedly one to behold.

No matter how moving human goodbyes may be, none compare to the last words of Jesus. His final words have provided many with comfort and assurance over the years. His last words were significant because they weren’t the dying words of just any man. They were utterances from the very mouth of God. Steeped with majestic theological truth, they stand as a beacon in human history, giving insight into the mysteries of God’s love.

Jesus’ fourth saying from the cross was particularly fascinating. Scripture says, “And at three Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lemá sabachtháni?’ which is translated, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’” (Mark 15:34). What was the meaning of Jesus’ cry? What significance rests in His words? Let’s consider three truths we can draw from Jesus’ fourth saying on the cross.

JESUS WAS JUDGED FOR US.

Before we examine the actual words of Jesus’ fourth saying, let’s look at their context. In particular, let’s take note of the backdrop against which they were uttered. As the events of the crucifixion rolled on, Scripture indicates something supernatural took place in the sky: “When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon” (Mark 15:33). The phenomenon wasn’t of natural causes. It was of supernatural origin. The sky wasn’t merely overcast. Inclement weather wasn’t the culprit. The sky was entirely black. It was as if it had become nighttime at midday.

A Sign of Judgement

Don’t misunderstand the meaning of the text. Mark didn’t employ a metaphor to portray the suffering of Jesus. His words were intended to be taken literally. As He did in the days of Moses, God performed a miracle in the natural realm. What seemed like nightfall occurred as a result of supernatural intervention.

It is unknown how such darkness took place. Did God hide the sun through some miraculous means? Did he send a dust storm? Could record-breaking rain clouds have been the cause? Some have proposed an eclipse was the reason for darkness. We can rule that possibility out, since the crucifixion took place at Passover,

a Jewish celebration that occurred during a full moon.¹ We can only speculate concerning the exact means by which God made the sky dark; however, we can rest assured that God supernaturally darkened the sky.

More important than the means of the miracle is the meaning of the miracle. If God created the heavens and the Earth, tasks like making the noon sky dark isn't that big of a deal. The important thing to consider isn't necessarily *how*. Instead, the thing to consider is *why* — *why* did the sky become black?

Scripture is often the best guide for interpreting Scripture. The Bible is the best commentary on the Bible. Comparing one passage of Scripture against the rest of Scripture can often provide great insight. Such is especially true of our current text.

A study of Scripture reveals that darkness was often associated with judgment in Bible times. Consider the dark skies of the ninth plague in Egypt (Exodus 10:21-22). Or, read Amos' prophecy. In speaking of pending judgment, he said, "And in that day — this is the declaration of the Lord God — I will make the sun go down at noon; I will darken the land in the daytime (Amos 8:9). Isaiah used similar language when prophesying of judgment on Judah: "Indeed, the stars of the sky and its constellations will not give their light. The sun will be dark when it rises, and the moon will not shine" (Isaiah 13:10).

Considering the precedent we find in Scripture, it seems the darkness at Golgotha had something to do with judgment. But what was the reason for such judgement? Was it directed toward the Roman soldiers who crucified the Son of God? Were the religious elite worthy of judgment?

The Just for the Unjust

The dark skies at Calvary weren't directed toward any human near the cross. Instead, it seems they were an indicator of God's judgment on His Own Son. The skies turned black because God judged Jesus on account of our sin. Our Lord died as a substitute in our place. He endured the torment our sin deserved. He suffered for every evil word, lustful thought, and sinful deed of God's people. The penalty for all of our transgressions was placed upon Him. Our Lord absorbed the punishment all sin deserves.

According to Old Testament Law, Jesus suffered a curse. He did so on behalf of those who deserved to be cursed and alienated from God (Deuteronomy 21:22-23 and Galatians 3:13). Peter described this reality, saying, "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring you to God, after being put to death in the fleshly realm but made alive in the spiritual realm" (1 Peter 3:18). Paul said, "He made the One who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

This is the fundamental essence of the Christian message — God's perfect and sinless Son died as a substitute on behalf of sinful people. Though the punishment for sin is death (Romans 3:23), God sent His perfect Son to die as a scapegoat on behalf of unrighteous people (Romans 5:8). The gloomy gray of Golgotha portrayed these realities. Occurrences in the natural realm signified something spectacular in the spiritual realm.

¹ Carson, [CD-Rom].

A Sacrifice for Others

I recently read a new's article concerning a woman who was victimized by the terroristic bombing at the 2013 Boston Marathon. Rebekah DiMartino stood about three feet from one of the Tsarnaev's homemade bombs when it was detonated. She suffered gruesome injuries to her left leg. Despite her ordeal, Rebekah describes herself as "blessed." How can one view such a horrific ordeal as being a source of happiness? DiMartino explained that her left leg shielded her 5 year old son from the bomb's blast. Though she endured a near two month hospital stay, and though she underwent over thirty surgeries, she finds comfort in her pain. She explains, "I cannot feel sorry for myself in the least bit because I know my son is running around like normal today. ... I thank God every day for my little boy still being here."²

Rebekah's story is truly amazing. Though she no longer has her left leg, she does have her son Noah. A part of her body was sacrificed on behalf of her boy. In a similar way, God made a sacrifice on our behalf. So that we might become His sons and daughters (1 John 3:1), He gave His Son as a shield to absorb the full blast of His furious wrath towards sin. All who trust and believe in Jesus' sacrifice enter into a relationship with God and receive eternal life (John 3:16).

Are you aware of these realities? Are you living by them? I remember when I first grasped the concept that Jesus died as my substitute. For years, I viewed Christianity as little more than a harsh system of religion and rules. Then I learned this principle of substitution. Suddenly, I no longer saw God as requiring me to perform in order to earn forgiveness. In trusting Christ's work on my behalf, I experienced release from sin and a sense of new life.

When we are aware that Jesus absorbed judgment for us, it changes how we look at both God and ourselves. Guilt and shame wilt in light of what Christ has done. Freedom and forgiveness belong to us because he was judged on behalf of our sins. We no longer have to live in fear and insecurity. Because Jesus paid it all, we are new and we are free.

OUR SIN WAS GREAT.

When Jesus uttered His fourth statement from Calvary, the crowd misheard His words. Scripture records, "When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "Look, He's calling for Elijah!" (Mark 15:36). Theologians and linguists have offered numerous explanations for why onlookers might have been confused. Why was Jesus' cry mistaken as a cry for Elijah? Quite possibly the words "Eloi" and "Elijah" sounded similar. However, many maintain it was unlikely the two words could have been confused with one another.

Perhaps there is another answer. It seems the issue was based upon ancient Jewish understanding regarding Elijah. He was one of Israel's most celebrated prophets. In Jesus' day, many Jews held to a superstitious belief that Elijah personally

² <http://www.bpnews.net/44272/boston-marathon-bomb-amputee-blessed>

appeared to righteous sufferers in times of distress.³ Some Jewish schools of thought even taught that Elijah had appeared like an angel on some occasions to rescue rabbis from persecution.⁴

In addition to all of this, many Jews had expectations concerning a futuristic return of Elijah. On the basis of scriptures like Malachi 3:1, many believed the prophet would return to Earth at Messiah's arrival. While such an interpretation of prophecy was close to the truth, it missed the meaning of the prophecy. The Lord's intent was to foretell of the way an Elijah-like figure would appear to announce Jesus' arrival. According to Luke 1:17, John the Baptist fulfilled this role at Christ's first coming.

These things give us a hint concerning the reason for the people's mention of Elijah. While some may genuinely have mistaken Jesus' cry to "Eloi," it seems the crowd intended to mock Jesus.⁵ Famous rabbis were known for calling out to Elijah for help. The crowd knew Jesus was in agony. He cried to the Lord for help, but they twisted His word for the purpose of cruel ridicule. "Look!", they exclaimed, "He's calling out to Elijah for deliverance!" Because of cultural customs and Jewish beliefs, and because of Jesus' Messianic claims, they made sport of Jesus in His darkest moment. In their mind, He couldn't have been the Son of God. He wasn't the Messiah. How could he be? He didn't live up to their expectations (John 7:40-42).

The crowd's calloused mockery of the Messiah at Calvary highlighted the depravity of the human heart. Their jeers gave ample proof of why Jesus had to die. Humanity is so wicked that it mocked the very Son of God as He died. Mocking any other man would have been cruel and tasteless; however, to mock the Anointed One was a different level of depravedness.

Lest we doubt we would have joined in on the crowds' jesting, it is important to remember the condition of our human hearts. Scripture speaks of the sinful propensity of mankind during the time of Noah by saying, "...the Lord saw that human wickedness was widespread on the earth and that every inclination of the human mind was nothing but evil all the time" (Genesis 6:5). Though thousands of years have passed since the Lord's judgment through the Flood, the human condition is essentially the same. Scripture says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). When writing to the Ephesians, Paul described the pre-conversion state of believers by saying:

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient. We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also (Ephesians 2:1-3).

³ Walvoord, John F., and Roy B. Zuck, Dallas Theological Seminary. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), [CD-Rom].

⁴ Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), [CD-Rom].

⁵ Walvoord and Zuck, [CD-Rom].

Such things should humble us. We should always remember that we are sinful, broken, depraved, and vile apart from Christ. The worst of us far outweighs the best of us. Given the right conditions, we would have surely cursed Jesus with the crowd and cheered as He desperately called out to God. How can any boast of goodness when we consider our own finiteness and fallenness? How can any rely on human goodness or trust in self-righteousness. Charles Spurgeon once lamented our condition:

We came into the world with a bias towards evil. Those of us who have any knowledge of our own nature must confess that there is in us a strong tendency towards sin, which is mixed up with our very being. This is not derived solely from faults of education, or from the imitation of others; but there is a bent within us in the wrong direction, and this has been there from our birth.⁶

Such things should also lead us to look to the Lord. Our brokenness erected a barrier between us and our Creator. J.C. Ryle once said, "Sin is a vast mountain between man and God."⁷ To have fellowship with God, we need our sins to be dealt with. Forgiveness is a necessity. Only Christ can help. One has rightly said, "So long as sin is unseen - Christ will be unsought. Those who are whole need not the physician – but those who are sick."⁸ May the cruel mockery of our Lord at Calvary make us see our need for salvation.

SEPARATION FROM GOD HAS BEEN REMOVED.

Because Jesus felt forsaken by God the Father at the cross, Christians can be assured that they will never be forsaken. Mark continued his narrative regarding the crucifixion by saying, "And at three Jesus cried out with a loud voice" (Mark 15:34). The Greek language underlying modern translations indicated that Jesus shouted.⁹ The fourth utterance was no mere spoken word, it involved a scream of traumatic horror. With a heave of desperation, our Savior yelled, "Eloi, Eloi, lemá sabachtháni?"

The phonetics of the Aramaic actually sound agonizing. What was the source of Jesus' pain? Did He holler because of His physical suffering? He had certainly endured a lot through the scourging and beatings He received. The process of being nailed to a cross was undoubtedly horrific. Though such things were surely pain invoking, it is interesting to note that Jesus neither cried out or complained about them while they were happening. His only cry came at the precise moment when the skies went black. The pain He experienced seemed to have something to do with God's judgment of sin.

⁶ Spurgeon, C.H. *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, 1881; 27* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1984), 186.

⁷ J.C. Ryle. *Practical Religion* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 22.

⁸ Mead, Matthew. *Spiritual Conviction from The Almost Christian* (1661). cThe Banner of Truth Magazine, 698. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2021), 23.

⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 103.

Christ was strategic in His word usage. His cry was a reference to Psalm 22, a Messianic Psalm. By quoting the passage, He indicated He was the fulfillment of God's promises for a deliverer. Even in His dying breaths, He staked claim to David's throne. Psalm 22:1 said, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from my deliverance and from my words of groaning?" Interestingly, the Psalm was often cited during daily prayers in Jerusalem at noon.¹⁰

Interestingly, Jesus didn't address His Heavenly Father with the same title he normally used — "Father" (Matthew 6:9; Luke 23:34). Instead, He referred to the Lord as "God." His choice of title, long with the darkened skies, highlighted His role as a sin substitute. Because He became sin for God's people (2 Corinthians 5:21), He encountered a degree of separation from God while on the cross.

Jesus expressed the reality of such separation by using a word translated "forsaken." The Greek of the New Testament literally meant "to leave down in." One has translated it as meaning "to leave in the lurch."¹¹ Another has rendered, "to provide no help."¹² The language depicted the act of one being deserted or abandoned.¹³

Certainly it is difficult to understand exactly how God could turn His back on His own Son. William Barclay said, "There is a mystery behind that cry which we cannot penetrate."¹⁴ The reformer Martin Luther, once secluded himself for days to study the meaning of Jesus' words. After emerging from his library, one asked about the results of his study. Luther replied, "God forsaken by God, who can understand that?"

We may never be able to fully understand Jesus' words. Some would make a distinction concerning Jesus' separation from God, saying He was cut off in a judicial sense, but not a relational sense.¹⁵ Perhaps this is a helpful way of thinking about the issue, but there seems to be a degree of divine mystery we cannot circumvent. There are secret things contained within Jesus' words.

However, the plain meaning of the words indicated there was some sort of separation between God the Father and God the Son at the cross. Jesus was forsaken by the Father to a certain degree and for a certain purpose. Because sin demands eternal punishment and separation from God (Genesis 3:22-24; Habakkuk 1:13; Romans 6:23; Revelation 20:14-15), Jesus was alienated from God. Because He was perfectly sinless, He was a perfect sacrifice for sin. As a perfect sacrifice, He offered

¹⁰ Keener, [CD-Rom].

¹¹ Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), [CD-Rom].

¹² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 103.

¹³ Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. *Baker's Greek New Testament Library*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), [CD-Rom].

¹⁴ Barclay, William, ed. *The Gospel of Mark*. *The Daily Study Bible Series*. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), [CD-Rom].

¹⁵ Brooks, James A. Mark. Vol. 23. *The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), [CD-Rom].

Himself as a substitute. Our sins no longer keep us from God. The veil that kept us from Him has been torn down.

GOD IS ALWAYS NEAR.

Because Jesus was forsaken for us, God will never turn His back on us. Such truth is a great source of encouragement. Consider the admonition of Hebrews 13:5 — “Your life should be free from the love of money. Be satisfied with what you have, *for He Himself has said, I will never leave you or forsake you.*” In addressing something as practical as money matters, the author of Hebrews regarded the presence of Christ as an antidote for all the soul’s struggles.

What gives Christians guarantee of God’s presence? How can we know the Lord won’t forsake us? Our assurance comes from the fact that Jesus was cut off from the Lord for us. The cross purchased the nearness of God for us.

Are these things real to you? Do you feel that the Lord is near to you? Do you have faith in His presence? No one needs to hide from Him, as Adam and Eve did in the Garden (Genesis 3:8). His presence is our present possession. His grace is always in our hearts. No sin is too strong when He is near. Fear, insecurity, anger, jealousy, and worry wilt in His shadow. Strength and security belong to those who know Him. Such things are possible because Jesus was separated from God for us.

Jesus Himself said, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). His words foretold of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Why could Jesus make such a promise? Because He was alienated from God for us. The cross brought God near to God’s people. Such truth should fill our hearts with hope. John Wesley rightly said, “The best of all, God is with us!”