

LOGOS
QUESTIONS

Was Jesus Really God-forsaken?



University of
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LOGOS
Institute for Analytic and
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Introduction

Suffering is a universal language. Most of us can resonate with the concept of feeling forsaken by God. We all speak the language of suffering because none of us has escaped the debris of living in a fallen world.

The Bible tells us that Jesus was no stranger to unspeakable suffering. Even though he had lived so close to God Jesus eventually cried out against God as he was delivered to death: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34). Christ's cry of dereliction is a sort of echo chamber that holds within it all the bloody history of the suffering of the world. Paradoxically, the Son of God seems to have known what it was like to be God-forsaken.

How are we to understand Christ's cry of dereliction? Was God faithful to his Son, or should we take Jesus at his word when he calls himself forsaken by God? The cry of dereliction raises questions replete with implications for our understanding of Trinity, Christology, and atonement. In sum, the question of Jesus' God-forsakenness carries us into the nerve centre of the gospel.

This booklet will ask three questions of Christ's cry of God-forsakenness that relate to the dynamics at play in the drama of redemption: (1) Was the Father actually angry with the Son? (2) Why did Jesus cry out that he was forsaken? (3) Why is forsakenness needed for atonement?¹

Father and Son

The first and most natural question to address about Christ's cry of dereliction is the relationship between himself and the Father. Jesus asks God, "why have you forsaken me?" At best, this implies that the Father turned his face away, abandoning his Son in the hour of greatest need. At worst, it implies that the Father himself turned toward the Son in wrath and anger, performing a sadistic display of divine violence. In either case, the cry of dereliction constitutes a hefty charge against the very fatherhood of God.

I want to suggest with the vast majority of theologians past that whatever else occurred at the cross there was no decisive breach in the love between the Father and the Son.

¹ Although I call upon an array of theologians for these questions I will principally refer to John Calvin's theology of Christ's descent into hell because all the considerations pertinent to this brief study are given terse and clear expression in his own writing on the subject.

The Father did not abandon, forsake, despise, reject, or rage against his Son. The love between Father and Son held firm at the cross. To illustrate why there could not have been any relational rupture at the cross, I will call on two reasons given by Calvin, one relating to who God is and one relating to how God saves. First, how could God ever be angry with his

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Son in whom he is well pleased? Second, how could Christ have appeased the Father if he himself were hateful to God?² These two rhetorical questions show that although Christ definitely cried out against God, God did not forsake his Son because God is love and Christ saves us by pleasing God with his once-for-all self-sacrifice.

Before Jesus was baptized in blood on the cross, he was first baptized with water in the Jordan. Matthew's gospel reports that when Jesus submitted to John's baptism of repentance, the heavens opened, and the Spirit descended upon him, followed by a heavenly voice saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." When Jesus submits to repent in our place and sanctifies himself with baptism for our sakes (John 17:19) the Father's response is not anger but delight. We can see here that long before Jesus cries out filial forsakenness at the cross, God the Father proclaims his incessant paternal pleasure upon the Son. The descent of the Spirit is important here because it signifies that the eternal bond of love inherent to the Father-Son relationship is now opened up through the baptized flesh of Jesus toward all humanity. By his incarnate submission to our condition, the eternally beloved Son of God procures the love of the Father within and for the humanity he assumed. Matthew's gospel is telling us that, because of Jesus, God now loves us no less than his own Son.

The question for dereliction is this: how could this Father, who had been so elated over his Son's submission to our condition in obedience to divine will, turn in wrath against the Son when that obedience finally reaches zenith at the cross? After all, wasn't it the Father who sent the Son to die for us on the cross? How could God be mad at Christ for obeying God in dying to save us? The biblical vision of God is not that the Father schizophrenically changed his mind about his Son at the cross, but that the Father incessantly cherished the sacrifice of Christ and found it eternally pleasing as a means of redemption for the world he loves. The being of God (the Father eternally loving the Son by the Spirit) witnesses against any triune rupture at the cross.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559, 2.16.10.

Moreover, Jesus is not only God's undyingly beloved Son: he is God himself. That means that to claim that God was angry with Christ at the cross would lead to the absurd conclusion that God was angry with God. But there is no "God against God." Christians believe that God's essence is "simple": that is, that there is no conflict within God because there are no composite parts in God. He is not like creatures that are composed of disparate parts and therefore subject to inner dissonance and discord. He is the Creator, with whom there is no shadow of change and in whom is perfect and harmonious agreement of being. This means that speaking of God against himself is a contradiction of terms. This shows that not only did the Father never hate the Son: God was never against himself. God's being is perfect love and harmony.

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Calvin also gives us a reason why the Father was not angry toward the Son that relates to how God saves humanity in Christ. If God was angry with Christ, that would mean that Christ himself had either sinned or had merited the wages of sin to the point of failing in his very mission to atone. Calvin frames this point in terms of Christ's priesthood: if he was hateful to God, then he is not a perfect high priest to whom God will listen. Priests have to be perfect to fulfil their office of representing others to God. Calvin reasons that when Jesus assumes our condition, he must do so in a way that enables his mission of bearing up our humanity to God as a sacrifice that God accepts with utter delight, not rejects with hatred. Thus, not only because of who God is as eternal love but also how God saves by accepting Christ's sacrifice, God the Father was supremely pleased with, not angered by, the hellish depths of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Theologically, it is important for us to tend to the pleasure of the Father as it operates precisely in the midst of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice.

Feeling Forsaken

If the Father did not forsake the Son, then what compels Christ to cry out that he is forsaken by God? I would like to answer this by drawing our attention to two aspects of the crucifixion: the first-time telling of the gospel narrative, and the perception of Jesus.

Many of us who are Christians are privileged in our knowledge of Christ's death and resurrection in a way we have probably not considered. We know the ending. We know that Jesus' Friday cry "why have you forsaken me?" will be finally answered by God on Sunday with a mighty resurrection from the dead. In the words of Alan Lewis, we have the privilege of being "second-time hearers" of the gospel story, which means that we know and can anticipate the story's happy ending.³ This allows us to see the preceding events of horror in the light of the hope that we know will soon come to alleviate the suffering. The hope we know is coming makes the suffering more endurable.

While privileging us with a unique perspective, our familiarity with the story of Jesus can also short-cut our appreciation of the reality of the story's horror before this hope breaks in. When Jesus and his disciples experienced the gospel story, they were not second-time hearers like us. They were "first-time hearers." They had not skipped to the final chapter. They did not know the story's end. For them, when Jesus was crucified and humiliated on a Roman gibbet, this was the end of his ministry and murder of his mission. He was a false prophet. He was wrong about being God's Son. Or worse still, he was right about being God's Son, but God had abandoned him. Although we can anticipate Sunday joy today, all they knew on the first Friday was sorrow.

Appreciating the reality of a first-time hearing of the gospel story helps us to understand why Jesus would cry out being God-forsaken. Despite theological qualifications, there is a real sense in which, at least for this first Friday, all seems lost and God seems to have forsaken his Son. Even if that is not our perspective now, it was the perspective of the disciples, and it served to make resurrection on Sunday all the more glorious because it was so unexpected. Remembering the "first-time" perspective of those who would have first witnessed these events helps us today to appreciate the gravity of the hopelessness and forsakenness they must have felt when all seemed lost.

What was Jesus perceiving in the midst of these events? We know that he responds to his suffering with the cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" As Jesus quotes the first line of Psalm 22, he seems to be witnessing to his failure as a Saviour and God's failure as a Father. However, some scholars have noted that a common practice is to imply an entire Psalm by quoting the Psalm's beginning. The Gospels therefore mean for us to read the cry of dereliction in the context of the entire Psalm.⁴ Since Psalm 22 ends in hopeful trust of God and expectation of rescue, we should therefore understand Jesus' recitation of

³ See Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 9-67.

⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 652-653.

the first verse not as a declaration of final divine tragedy but an exegetical signal that the Trinity is not broken at the cross.⁵

The entirety of Psalm 22 witnesses to the reality that God did not abandon his Son. But Jesus recited the first line to emphasize that he felt abandoned on the cross. While the hopeful ending of Psalm 22 has its merits as an important contextual nuance for our understanding of the cross, I do not think it necessarily means that Jesus himself was firmly expecting God's rescue. Jesus would have been under such severe psychological fragmentation and bodily trauma that it is reasonable to assume he was not doing careful exegesis while being crucified. The simplest explanation of his cry of dereliction is that Jesus was a devout Jew who

inhabited a "psalm-shaped world" and was used to regularly praying with the Psalms as an emotional framework for interpreting adverse life experience.⁶

As he suffered beyond measure Jesus scraped through his mind for a Davidic line that gave voice to his traumatic experience of feeling abandoned.

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Calvin notes in his commentary that although the rest of the New Testament is written in Greek, the cry of dereliction is relayed in the Aramaic language that Christ would have spoken in his own life. This has the effect of hearing the cry today as if we are hearing the original agonized voice of Jesus.⁷ I think that is important. From the perspective of the original Friday crucifixion and the horrific detail of its torture, it is important that we consider the possibility that Scripture may be inviting us to take with seriousness the forsaken feelings of Jesus Christ as it relays the words he spoke on the first Good Friday. We can take Christ at his word: though the Father did not forsake the Son, Jesus actually felt God-forsaken and his unspeakable suffering drew forth a cry of witness to these feelings of abandonment.

⁵ Thomas H. McCall, *Forsaken: The Trinity, the Cross, and Why It Matters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012), 37-42.

⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2013), 11.

⁷ *Calvin's Commentaries*, Matthew 27:46.

Forsakenness and Atonement

In the previous two sections I have asserted that while the Father did not forsake the Son (due to God's being as Trinity and Christ's atoning mission) the Son truly felt forsaken (due to Christ's traumatized human perception). We might even paradoxically say that though God did not forsake the Son, to the extent that perception is reality, the Son was forsaken. This raises a significant question about the nature of atonement: Why was it necessary for Christ to feel so forsaken by God? Although Christ's forsaken feelings pose no threat to his divine status they demonstrate his full humanity in common with us which was necessary for him to fully atone for our fallen condition.

First, it seems difficult to observe both the forsaken feelings of Christ and his divine self-knowledge. If Jesus is God and God has perfect knowledge of himself, then Jesus has perfect knowledge of God. How can we say that Jesus both had perfect knowledge of God's love and yet felt forsaken by God? Wherever Christ's solidarity with humanity in dereliction appears to occlude his divine status, we may call upon the theological tradition of "kryptic" Christology. "Kryptic" comes from the Greek word *krypsis* which means "hiding" or "concealment." Theologically, kryptic Christology is the recognition about Christ that he was willing to hide some aspects of the riches of his divinity in order to create space for the weakness of his humanity. This has allowed theologians of the past (such as Aquinas, Erasmus, and Calvin) to treasure the abject humiliation of Jesus without denigrating his incessant and unreserved participation in the very life and being of God. Kryptic Christology is a way to say that Jesus suffered severe pains not despite being God but precisely in a human nature that operated in concert with a divine nature concealing its power. It is as if Jesus stepped out on a glass balcony at the top of a skyscraper. He may have known in his divinity that the floor was glass, but in his humanity, he could not see ground beneath his feet. He allowed himself to feel deathly afraid.⁸

And now the apex of the story comes: why would this incarnate Son of God, fully divine and fully human, create space in himself for the humiliation and terror of feeling God-forsaken? Calvin gives the answer that it was only in the face of feeling forsaken by God that Christ could decisively prove a perfect obedience that redeems humanity. The significance of forsakenness is the faithfulness it proves. Only in the midst of having lost the vision of God's goodness could Christ have rendered as a human substitute a trust in God's goodness that was not dependent on the vision of that goodness and as such was the most miraculous demonstration of faith imaginable. He trusted God when God seemed the most untrustworthy.

We can deduce this from the very cry of dereliction itself. First, Christ says "My God, my God." He is calling God his own and taking God to himself. This is a cry of faith and trust. Second, Christ cries "why have you forsaken me?" He is crying out against God. This is a cry of despair and fear. The combination of these two cries is a remarkable co-incidence that seems

⁸ Thanks to Tim Pawl for this striking analogy.

paradoxical: in the midst of feeling forsaken, Christ does not cease to call God his own and to put his trust in the Father even as he cries out against him. This means not only that Christ demonstrated a faith and obedience that reversed and redeemed the disobedience and unbelief of Adam: it also means that faith is big enough to hold the ambivalence of despair. Christ has demonstrated that it is possible for humans to suffer unspeakable torments and despair of life while still trusting in God. He did this by his perfect obedience in the face of adverse circumstances and by trusting God's goodness even when that goodness had receded from view.

Viewed this way, Christ's cry of dereliction was not a threat to his faithful trust in God but the supreme expression of faith. Moreover, the important thing is that Christ did this as a human. Christ's cry of feeling forsaken and trusting in faith toward the Father signals his total humanity in common

with those whose condition he assumes. Christ's experience of God-forsakenness is therefore a swift refutation of some notions that belittle Christ's full humanity. For example, the cry of dereliction means that it could not have been the case that it was impossible for Christ to perceive God's wrath or fear God's judgment. He clearly feared his Father's absence and felt forsaken. Christ saw things the way we do when we suffer. However, the cry of dereliction also means that it could not have been the case that Christ did not have a human will that actually struggled to obey God. He clearly struggled through painful feelings to put his trust in the Father. Christ wanted the things that we want when we suffer. He wanted relief. Nevertheless, he obeyed God's will and trusted God's goodness as a human.⁹

In sum, Christ's cry "My God, why have you forsaken me?" signals his incessant union with humanity in the totality of its alienation so that as a genuine member of the human race he could render a trust and obedience toward God that redeems us. He is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. He has felt forsaken. But he has trusted for us in the Father. This is a remarkable atonement that resounds into the dark depths of human emotion.

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⁹ These two half-human notions of Christ's perception and will are the ancient heresies of Apollinarianism and Monothelitism, both of which Calvin polemically refutes using Christ's cry of dereliction (*Institutes*, 1559, 2.16.12).

Conclusion

In this brief booklet I have asked how we are to understand Christ's cry of dereliction and have explored some theological implications involved. I have suggested that the Father did not forsake the Son because of who God is and how God saves. I have also suggested that Christ nevertheless felt forsaken like any other human who suffers east of Eden. The forsakenness Christ felt is important because it demonstrates his incessant solidarity with

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us in our alienation from God, one another, and even ourselves. The marvellous mystery is that Christ held faith when he felt forsaken. That means everything for us who continue to wander in darkness and despair.

Further Reading

1. Thomas H. McCall, *Forsaken: The Trinity, the Cross, and Why It Matters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012)
2. Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001)
3. Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018)
4. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000)

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