

WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

Jesus once said: you're blessed when you're poor, when you're sad, when you're humbled, hungry, suffering, humiliated, and hated.

I wonder if he felt *blessed* on the cross?

These experiences don't tend to make us feel happy or blessed. More often than not, they cause us to doubt and question: Lord, where are you and what are you doing?

- Where was God when my aunt died, leaving my 3 young cousins without their mother?
- Where is God when war or natural disaster left an entire country humiliated and starving?
- Where is God when children are trafficked, abused, and violated?

These are BIG questions, perhaps too big for me to answer. But not too big to bring to God.

For the next several weeks leading up to Easter, we're going to be looking at the 7 last sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels and reflecting on what it means for God to be with us in the valley.

This **first saying** is the only one recorded in both Matthew and Mark, and it's a bit profound in its contradiction: God incarnate cries out as God forsaken.

Before I share some reflections on what this may mean for us, I want to take a moment to chew on the text together a bit. There are some intriguing points of the narrative, and they bring up questions that don't have clear or settled answers. But exploring the options may at least give us a greater appreciation for what is going on in the text.

What's going on with the darkness in the land? Naturalistic explanations and reactions to those explanations... Historical references outside the Bible. But all of those are concerned with reporting whether or not it happened, not WHY it happened. And I think the text itself is concerned with more than just fact reporting. It tells something of the drama of this moment.

- Does the darkness symbolize the reality of Jesus' abandonment?
- Or is it a symbol of the Father's grief over the suffering of the Son?
- Or perhaps it is the groaning of creation in response to its Creator's anguish?

Something SIGNIFICANT is happening, and the created order knows it.

In fact, while people have had a terribly difficult time recognizing and responding to Jesus, the rest of creation has shown no such confusion.

- Stars and heavenly hosts celebrate Jesus' **birth**.
- The heavens rend and a dove symbolize God's delight over Jesus' Sonship at his **baptism**.
- At Jesus' **transfiguration** in Mt 17, it says that Peter, James and John see Jesus shining in radiant light with a bright cloud enveloping them.

3 supernatural signals of delight through song and light.
But now, supernatural darkness. And no delight, but deep grief and anguish.

Then there's the confusing episode with Jesus' cry and the following conversation about Elijah.

Amid the darkness, Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" - but he says it in Aramaic, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"

This is a direct quote from Psalm 22 which is the cry of an innocent and righteous man yearning for vindication by God. **He only gets out the first line...** perhaps because of his lack of breath, perhaps because it's the honestly all he feels at the moment.

It says that when people nearby heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah"

Why did they think that? Either

4. they **misheard** him, or
5. they are they are **deliberately twisting his words** to mock him, OR
6. they **recognize the psalm and the hope that comes with it**. They may be pairing that with the prophecy from Malachi 4 that Elijah would return before the day of the Lord. It was not uncommon for rabbis to appeal to Elijah for help specifically, and if Jesus really was the Messiah, **perhaps they expected his only hope was Elijah to come to help**.

Whatever they actually thought, what they do is to offer him a drink of common wine. Then it says they wait to see if Elijah will actually come to save him.

NOTE: People have mocked Jesus up to this point... but that was BEFORE the darkness.

Now they have seen the sky turn dark at midday and the whole mood has shifted. They may genuinely think anything could happen here.

But no help comes. *At least not in the way they were looking for.*
Jesus gives another loud cry, and breathes his last.

This is followed by several supernatural events - temple curtain torn, earthquake, random people being raised to life...to such an extent that those guarding Jesus exclaimed, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

And yet, Jesus was gone.

This is a dark, dark moment in the story of salvation, and yet even here I want to suggest 3 ways that we see GOOD NEWS.

There are 3 affirmations I think we can make about our relationship with God in the midst of suffering...

1. You are NOT ALONE. God is NEAR.
2. You are NOT HOPELESS. God is ABLE.
3. You are NOT OFFENSIVE. God is LISTENING.

I. YOU ARE NOT ALONE IN SUFFERING. GOD IS NEAR. (Mt 17:5; 45-46).

The **first truth** we can affirm is that God is near to us in the midst of our pain and suffering.

The **darkness** and the **cry of agony** together tell us of our God who can empathize with us in pain - not just the Son, but the Father as well.

In the deep darkness of that day, we see the grief of the Father at the death of the Son.
In the cry of Jesus, we see the lament of the Son in the agony of dying.

German Theologian Jurgen Moltmann says it this way:

*"To understand what happened between Jesus and his God and Father on the cross, it is necessary to talk in Trinitarian terms. The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son. **The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father**, and if God has constituted himself as the Father of Jesus Christ, then he also suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of his Son..."*

[Don't miss this, because it's so important. He says that it's in this suffering that we are united to God in a profound way]...

What proceeds from this event between Father and Son is the Spirit which justifies the godless, fills the forsaken with love and even brings the dead alive, since even the fact that they are dead cannot exclude them from this event on the cross; the death in God also includes them..."

- Moltmann, *The Crucified God*

Hear this Friends: The GOOD NEWS of this moment on the cross is that our God identifies with us in our deepest moments of anguish.

The Son has endured betrayal, abandonment, mockery, torture, profound shame.
The Father has experienced profound loss and grief.

You may *feel* alone. You are not alone. Our God is near to us in our suffering. Grieving with us.

*Where were You when all that I've hoped for?
Where were You when all that I've dreamed?
Came crashing down in shambles around me
Where were You when sin stole my innocence?
Where were You when I was ashamed?
Hiding in a life I wish I never made
You were on the cross.*

But why? If this experience is so bad, why go through it at all? To bring hope where all feels lost.

II. YOU ARE NOT HOPELESS... GOD IS ABLE (Mt 4:5-6; Php 2:9).

We are not alone in our suffering: that is a comfort of its own...but there is more to it than that.

We will talk about this in more detail come Easter Sunday, but I have to forecast a little. **Because ultimately the grave will not stay empty!** And it is in the resurrection that we will discover that our God is not only able to identify with us in our suffering but also uniquely able to free us from it.

Even in the darkness of that Friday we see the power of the Spirit break out as the temple curtain is torn, dead people start walking out of graves. **This is just the beginning.**

But it is precisely BECAUSE God has so directly experienced and confronted suffering and death that the resurrection is so meaningful for us. God has confronted death and all its friends, and they have all been exposed and rendered powerless.

Jesus has been ready for this confrontation from the beginning of his ministry. Do you remember what happened immediately after Jesus' baptism? He spent 40 days out in the wilderness. **One of the 3 temptations the devil hit him with was the suggestion to throw himself off the temple and watch the angels come running to help.**

Devil: "Isn't the Father able to help you? Aren't you the Son of God? Shouldn't everyone know?"

But Jesus did not need to prove to everyone how much the Father loved him. He was secure in that love - Secure enough that he could endure the cross, knowing that there was a greater victory on the other side.

We are given that same hope. The Bible never promises us that our life will be free of suffering. It is part of life. A result of sin in our broken world.

But the Bible does promise that those who are united to Christ in faithfulness will be vindicated in the New Creation.

So even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we can do so without fear. Not because we will never experience harm or death. But because death has lost its sting.

NOT: "Some glad morning, I'll fly away" - escapist mentality; this is just how the world is.

MLK Jr: *"I've been to the mountaintop... I may not get there with you, but we as a people will get to the promised land... I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."*

You are not hopeless or helpless in your suffering. God is able.

The question is not ultimately whether God will be victorious, but how we will endure in faithfulness until the battle is done.

And here is where Jesus' words on the cross become so meaningful for us.

The **third truth** we can affirm is that our lament in suffering is not offensive to God. God is listening.

III. YOU ARE NOT OFFENSIVE... GOD IS LISTENING (46-50).

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” - a cry of lament taken directly from Psalm 22.

That fact that it's a quote should not detract from Jesus' experience. He quotes it for a reason.

Jesus is leaning on the Psalm BECAUSE of his experience. The Psalms gave him language to articulate his anguish and pain.

What can we take away from this? Lament is right and appropriate.

This is an important lesson, because I know many have been taught that Christians should always be **shiny, happy people**. We don't talk about our issues, because that would show a lack of faith or offense to God.

But your pain and lament is not offensive to God. God is listening.

There ARE things that are offensive to God - Greed, Spite, Hypocrisy, Abuse... but not grief.

It is not offensive to God when you cry out in frustration, anger, doubt, and despair. God is big enough for your doubt. Profoundly, God himself expressed these words of deep anguish. On the cross, Jesus has given us both example and permission.

- You are not limited to platitudes and niceties in your walk with God.
- It is not offensive to God when you doubt and rage.
- In fact, in the Psalms God has given us half a book's worth of words to say when we are angry and grieving.
- So PLEASE take your pain to God. It is not offensive to him.

You know what IS offensive? To withhold your heart from God when he has gone to the utter depths of the human experience to show love, grace, and empathy.

CONCLUSION - we're not alone, not helpless, not offensive to God...yet we often act as if we don't know he loves us

As I reflected on Jesus' cry this week, I asked God what he might want to say to me...

I was surprised to hear, “My child, my child, why have you forsaken me?”

I'm a pastor...but in the middle of my own busyness and distractions, even I often withhold my doubt, grief, and anger from God.

I hear the Spirit calling, **“I have time for your pain... Do you have time for me?”**

Today, may we give Jesus our time and our hearts. May we not forsake him.