

Session 4

WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

*Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34
(Hebrews 4:12-16; Psalm 22)*

Memory Verse

⁴⁶ *About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Elí, Elí, lemá sabachtháni?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”*

– MATTHEW 27:46, CSB

Why Have You Forsaken Me?

THEOLOGICAL THEME: The suffering of Jesus offers hope to Christians.

The famous question Jesus asked from the cross, “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?” is one of the most discussed parts of Scripture. That discussion is had frequently by people of all sorts of religious background, or no religious background at all. The question resonates with so many because pain, difficulty, and desperation are common human experiences. Professor J. Budziszewski grappled with the feeling of God’s silence or absence in a 2002 Focus on the Family article:

Trouble suffocates me. Worry entangles me. By night I can’t sleep, by day I can’t rest. The burden of suffering is intolerable. Where is God? Does He know, or are my prayers heard only by the wall? Is He near, or somewhere distant, only watching?

If you hurt enough to ask such questions, you deserve an answer.

Some people think that you don’t. You’re sick, you’re dying, you’ve been deserted, you’ve lost a child, you’re innocent but accused of wrongdoing — and they try to shush you. Their intentions may be good, but they are hard to bear. “Don’t question God’s ways; He might hear you.” In my cry of anguish, don’t I want Him to hear me? “It’s probably for your own good.” If I’m to be tormented for my own good, don’t I get a say in the matter? “I’m sure there’s a good reason.” No doubt there is, but did I ask for a philosophical explanation? What I asked is “Where is God?”¹

Such haunting questions typically appear in the face of insurmountable opposition or great stress. For those who have experienced such seasons, merely reading the questions can bring shivers of anguished seasons and the agony of uncertainty. Yet, in the face of such seasons, Jesus offers hope that can only come from Him. He also suffered. He also wondered. Because He did, there is hope for the world.

? Have you ever experienced a season when you wondered where God was in the midst of hardship? If so, describe what that experience was like.

? Who in your life do you most quickly turn to for support during seasons of distress? What do they base their advice or guidance on? Why do you seek them out, rather than other people?

Session Summary

In this week's session, Jesus' fourth saying from the cross was what has come to be known as the "cry of dereliction." This desperate prayer from Jesus came as His earthly life was drawing to an end. He was in anguish, enduring the excruciating pain of the cross and the unspeakable burden of the sin of the world, which He took upon Himself. Because He did so, however, hope was extended to all who would follow after Jesus, even in their most desperate moments.

1. The Prayer of Desperation (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34; Psalm 22:1)

In Matthew's Gospel, the account of Jesus' fourth saying from the cross appears immediately after Matthew described the insults hurled at Jesus from the two criminals who flanked Him on crosses of their own. This was evidently before one of the criminals experienced a penitent heart and came to Jesus' defense, as noted in Luke's Gospel. According to Craig Blomberg, "Matthew, however, does not wish to detract from Jesus' agony. Verse 43 is unique to his [Matthew's] Gospel and reflects his emphasis on the Son of God, also alluding to Ps. 22:9. Jesus' opponents unwittingly testify to his identity. Precisely because Jesus is the Son of God, He consciously decides not to come down off the cross. . . . It was the power of love, not nails, that kept Him there."²

Mark's Gospel, though normally much more concise than Matthew's, recorded the fourth saying almost exactly as Matthew did. The substance of Mark's Gospel, as it was the earliest one written, was borrowed in part by Matthew and Luke in their Gospel writings. The practice of borrowing involved one author borrowing ideas and concepts from another reputable source. However, the similarities between Mark's and Matthew's accounts of the prayer of dereliction went far beyond borrowed concepts. They are virtually identical, testifying to the centrality and gravity of this event in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Jesus experienced pain of every sort from every direction. His disciples had long since deserted Him, with the exception of John. He witnessed the impact of the brutality of His execution on His mother. His enemies tortured Him, mocked Him, and nailed His body to a tree. The criminals, who were deserving of their own crosses according to Roman law, hurled insult after insult at Jesus. Those who could stand the sight of crucifixion gathered at the foot of Jesus' cross to mock Him regarding His claims of being the Son of God. Mark's Gospel emphasizes the growing isolation and loneliness of Jesus from the Gethsemane event throughout His Passion (Mark 14:32-41). Finally, as His physical life drew to a close and He fulfilled the long-prophesied role as the perfect sacrifice for the sin of all humanity, the filth of that sin severed the communion with the Father.



How have seasons of desperation impacted your understanding of God's presence with you?



Application: Who do you know that needs the hope Jesus alone offers to confront difficulties and trials? How are you praying for Jesus to make Himself real to that person?

In the midst of His desperation on the cross, as He had done so many times in His earthly ministry, Jesus quoted Scripture. In His utter anguish, Jesus quoted the first verse of Psalm 22, which King David had written centuries earlier. David's life was

in danger many times, but the agony he described in Psalm 22 exceeded his normal expression in severity. Cornered by his enemies, even to the point of impending death, David felt as though even God had abandoned him.

Many scholars, including James Brooks, point to the practice “to sometimes cite only one verse but to do so as a means of referring to a larger passage. If that were the purpose in the present instance, the reference would be to all of Ps. 22. Taken as a whole it is not so much a complaint of abandonment in time of trouble as it is an expression of confidence that God will deliver from trouble.”³ Being careful not to lessen or move too quickly past the agony of Christ for the sake of humanity, reading all of Psalm 22 paints a picture of a servant of God suffering to the point of death and hopelessness, but standing on the hope of God’s imminent deliverance.

2. Jesus Knows . . . (Hebrews 4:12-13)

Most of us can recall a scenario in which a well-intentioned person attempted to comfort us with the platitude, “I know how you feel.” Such platitudes ring hollow and cold, and they frequently do more harm than good. Conversely, when legitimate empathy exists, the balm of seasoned words can offer great comfort. In the ultimate fulfillment of such empathy, the writer of Hebrews repeatedly returned to the experiential understanding Jesus has for those for whom He died. Jesus did not walk the earth transcendent above its difficulties, challenges, and temptations. Rather, He experienced life as all humanity does. He felt tired and hungry. His heart broke over the death of loved ones like Lazarus. He encountered temptation. Jesus knows what it is like to be human (Hebrews 4:14-16).

For that reason, the writer of Hebrews explained the depth of His holy knowledge of His creation. The Word of God, which was the same introductory title John gave to Jesus at the opening of his Gospel, is living and effective. That means that it accomplishes its purpose and is perpetually at work. The nature of that work was described as “penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow.” The divine precision of God’s Word knows nothing of limitation or spaces so tight and private that they cannot be laid open with its blade.

Bringing the dividing ability of the Word of God to sharpest focus, the author explained that the Word of God “is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Nothing is hidden from the divine omniscience of God.

? How does it make you feel when you consider the depth of what God knows about you? What impact does that have on the way you view others?

? Application: With whom are you in regular, transparent conversation about how God’s Word is changing and challenging you? How does that community help you in living out what God is calling you to next?

To drive home the point of how thoroughly God knows His people, the writer of Hebrews explained it in the most vulnerable way possible. All creatures, which was to say everything that had been created, or everything other than God, were exposed by the Word of God. Any attempts to cover up sinfulness or brokenness with a polished exterior were foolish and futile. Compounding the terms “naked” and “exposed” in such close proximity heightened the sense of vulnerability. Even more significant was the identity of the One to whom all of creation was exposed—the very One to whom an account must be given. God, who judges righteously, had uninhibited access and knowledge to even the tiniest, most subconscious detail of every created thing. Jesus knows.

3. Jesus’ Suffering is the Pathway to Hope (Hebrews 4:14-16)

Jesus’ knowledge of and identification with His creation was precisely what made Him the perfect High Priest. Just like the High Priests found in the Old Testament, Jesus represented and intervened for a people with whom He identified. That identification meant that He was like them. The writer of Hebrews explained that the identification included facing all manner of temptations. He experienced every weakness common to man, every frailty that plagued the flesh, and every enticement that sought to lure humanity from God’s ultimate design. The singular divergent aspect of Jesus’ humanity, though, was that He did all of this yet was without sin.

The particular temptation that the writer to the Hebrews confronted was the temptation to fall away from following Christ and return to one's former life in hopes of avoiding the persecution that came with being a Christian. Remembering His cry from the cross, Jesus experienced more pain and persecution than was humanly comprehensible. In addition to the excruciating physical suffering, Jesus endured the momentary separation from the Father as He took the sin of the world upon Himself.

? Why is it important to understand that Jesus faced the same temptations and frailty that all humanity does? How does this reinforce the fact that Jesus knows what His creation experiences when they suffer or struggle?

? Application: How do the suffering of Jesus on the cross and His experience of abandonment offer hope to you?

The result of Jesus' perfect sacrifice, serving as both the High Priest who offered the sacrifice and as the sacrifice itself, was the removal of the barrier of sin that kept humanity from God. To that end, the writer of Hebrews encouraged his readers to not just come into God's presence or sneak into God's presence as though they were there by the skin of their teeth. Rather, he prompted his readers to approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that they "may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need" (v.16). In other words, Christians, because of their relationship with Jesus through His sacrifice on the cross, can seek help and find mercy in their moments of desperation. Jesus modeled that in His fourth saying. Just as He sought God the Father in the midst of His abandonment, the Father raised Him from the dead.

Conclusion

The fourth saying from the cross can be extremely difficult to understand. The idea that the relationship between God the Father and God the Son could be separated is hard to process. The reality is that the separation was the consequence of Jesus taking the sin of the world on Himself so that He could gift His righteousness to those who accepted Him as Savior. There are several things to consider in prayerfully applying these passages.

First, God is limitlessly and completely aware of every single detail of every single person's life. That is an extremely inclusive statement for a reason. Many times, people can feel like they are not worthy of praying to God or feel the need to be less than completely honest with God about their need for Him. People can experience great shame when confessing their sin to God. The truth of the matter is that God already knows about all of it. In fact, He is more aware than even the person who is confessing the sin so reluctantly. Remembering Romans 5:8, though; "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us," Jesus knows the struggle, brokenness, frailty, and sin common to men . . . and He gave His life to free humanity from it.

Second, everyone needs to know that Jesus is the hope in their season of desperation. This statement is also the fuel for the mission of the church. As the church exists in a community filled with people who do not know Jesus as Savior, the opportunity to be the extenders of real hope is a daily occurrence. Praying for those who are lost, asking God to present opportunities for gospel conversations, faithfully engaging others with the truth of Scripture when those gospel conversations happen, and being an active, missional force in the community are critical strategies for being hope bearers in a desperate world.

Third, Jesus offers strength, grace, and mercy in our moments of desperation. Part of the blessing of Jesus always being with Christians is that Christians can experience grace and strength beyond their own power in seasons of great distress. In fact, there are aspects of following Christ that one can only learn in sharing in His sufferings. While that doesn't mean that one should anxiously look forward to suffering, it does mean that, even in the midst of one's most dire season, there is intimacy to be experienced in a Savior that never leaves or forsakes His own.

? Describe a time when you were encouraged by the words of a friend in the midst of great stress or difficulty? What did he or she say to change your point of view? What hope did his or her words give you?

? How honest would you say you are with God about the condition of your life? How does realizing that He already knows what you are hesitant to admit change things?

? Have you interacted with anyone lately who needs a word of hope? How can you initiate a conversation with that person to share the hope you have in Christ?

CHRIST CONNECTION: Jesus’ “cry of dereliction” modeled the prayer of the truly desperate. Just as Jesus’ desperate prayer was answered by God through His resurrection, those who follow Christ have reason to hope in their most desperate of prayers.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: The church has the opportunity to extend hope that is available only through Jesus to those who are in desperate need of rescue.



FOR NEXT WEEK

I Thirst

Main Passages

- John 19:28-30; John 4:7-15; John 7:37-39

Session Outline

1. The Thirst that Fulfilled Prophecy (John 19:28-30)
2. Thirst: An Invitation to Living Water (John 4:7-15)
3. Streams of Living Water (John 7:37-39)

Memorize

⁴⁶ About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lemá sabachtháni?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

- Matthew 27:46, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Romans 10:10-17
- Tuesday - Matthew 9:37-38
- Wednesday - 1 Peter 3:15
- Thursday - 1 Corinthians 9:22
- Friday - Matthew 5:13-16
- Saturday - Romans 1:16

References

¹Budziszewski, J. “Where is God in the Midst of All My Troubles?” from focusonthefamily.com. February 1, 2002. <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/get-help/where-is-god-in-the-midst-of-all-my-troubles/>. Accessed 1/6/2020

²Blomberg, Craig L. Matthew. NAC. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992.

³Brooks, James A. Mark. NAC. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991.