

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 18: The Cry of Abandonment

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The darkness over the land serves as the visible context or backdrop to the Savior's cry of dereliction. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34). Jesus had been hanging on the cross for almost six hours. During the physical tortures He had not uttered one word of pain, suffering or anguish. Even during His soul agonies, with the exception of Gethsemane, He had quietly and patiently endured virtually every variety of inward agony which a sinless soul could experience. But now near the time of His death He cries out to His God. This cry of abandonment marks the period which is the climax of our Lord's suffering. This is the period of His mysterious agony because of the desertion of His Father. It was during this time, the time of darkness and silence "that He suffered the withdrawal of all sensible tokens of his Father's love; the suspension of every kind of sensible support, of every display of divine complacency; the felt manifestation of God's righteous displeasure at sin; the total eclipse of the hallowed light which had formerly cheered him amid the deepest gloom; the paternal desertion which drew from him the deep groan of bereavement, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.'"¹ Regarding this cry of abandonment Spurgeon writes,

I do not think that the records of time, or even of eternity, contain a sentence more full of anguish. Here the wormwood and the gall, and all the other bitterness are undone. Here you may look as into a vast abyss; and though you strain your eyes, and gaze till sight fails you, yet you perceive no bottom; it is measureless, unfathomable, inconceivable. This anguish of the Saviour on your behalf and mine is no more to be measured and weighed than the sin which needed it, or the love which endured it. We will adore where we cannot comprehend.²

As we examine this mysterious and difficult section of Scripture we will consider: (1) preliminary comments regarding our Lord's cry of abandonment; (2) the significance of this cry in the overall context of Scripture; (3) the meaning of this cry to Jesus on the cross; and (4) what we must learn from this cry that will affect our daily lives.

(1) There are a number of things about this cry of dereliction that need to be noted before we go deeper into its meaning and significance. First, both Matthew and Mark quote the words in transliterated Hebrew/Aramaic and then give the Greek translation. In Mark's account the statement is in Aramaic, our Lord's everyday language; while in Matthew's version the Hebrew "Eli" is used, "My God," followed by the Aramaic words for "Why have You forsaken Me?" The use of the original tongue probably sets up the misunderstanding in Matthew 27:47-49 and Mark 15:35-36 regarding Elijah.

Second, our Lord deliberately quotes from the Scriptures regarding His suffering, Psalm 22:1. Jesus expressed his agony using the Word of God not only as a testimony to Himself as a

¹ William Symington, *On the Atonement of Jesus Christ* (New York: Robert Carter, 1839), 150.

² Charles H. Spurgeon, "Lama Sabachthani," 36:133.

fulfillment of the Scriptures, but also to direct us in prayer. The Psalms are not only the church's hymn book, but also a supreme guide as to how and when to pray.

We must not forget that the cry of abandonment was indeed a prayer unto God. The Savior, even in His deepest agony and humiliation, does not waiver in the least. Even as He carries upon Himself the imputed sin of the whole world, He faithfully looks to God. Even from the abyss of the forsakenness of His Father, He reaches out in prayer. The Mediator's perfect obedience, His love of the Scriptures and His habit of prayer do not diminish on the cross. "The Savior's outcry is not against God, but to God. 'My God, my God': He makes a double effort to draw near. True Sonship is here. The child in the dark is crying after his Father—'My God, my God.' Both the Bible and prayer were dear to Jesus in his agony."³

Interestingly, we see that the whole passion narrative is bracketed by the prayers of Jesus that are the response to agony. At the beginning of the passion narrative in Gethsemane (Mk. 14:33-36; Mt. 26:36-39; Lk. 22:41-44) and here only moments before His death (Mk. 15:34; Mt. 27:46), our Lord cries out with faith, love and obedience to His Father. This reality completely eliminates any idea that the Son had a crisis of faith while on the cross. That Jesus humbly bowed the knee to His Father and refused to quarrel with His lot as the sin-bearer can be seen in the words of covenant love, "My God, my God." The Savior was "obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8). This means that the Mediator's obedience to God extended through the whole period of His life even throughout His suffering on the cross. "He does not ask that the forsaking may end prematurely, he would only understand anew its meaning. He does not shrink, but rather dedicates himself anew to God by the words, 'My God, my God,' and by seeking to review the ground and reason of that anguish which he is resolute to bear even to the bitter end."⁴

Anyone who understands anything of the piety nurtured by the Scriptures will understand our Lord's citation of the Bible in His time of suffering. "Pious people in anxious moments of life almost naturally quote the Scriptures. There are many of those who pray, and who, when they reach the strongest feeling in prayer, immediately start using the phraseology of the Bible.... Whoever lives in the Scriptures, will, precisely in moments of great stress as in moments of great joy, speak in quotations."⁵ The Savior lived a life saturated with the sacred Scriptures and prayer. Therefore, His natural and habitual response to trials and suffering was to pray and take refuge in God's Word. By His holy sinless example Christ recommends "to us the use of scripture—expressions in prayer, which will *help out infirmities*."⁶

Third, both Mark and Matthew emphasize that Christ cried out or shouted His petition. "Jesus shouted with a great voice." The word (*eboesen* from *boaw*) translated "cried out" is a strong word indicating that our Lord very loudly cried out these words. This would have been a very dramatic and shocking scene. Out of the darkness and silence comes a loud pronounced cry of anguish. The unexpected shout would have startled the people who were at the crucifixion.

This loud cry of anguish is significant because it demonstrates that the dying Savior was in full possession of His faculties. Normally a person crucified would gradually lose his strength. Often the person would become delirious and would eventually lose consciousness. But even after nearly six hours on the cross, Jesus' mind is clear and sharp. With His sinless, alert mind, He experiences the wrath of God against sin. The loud cry also demonstrates the great

³ Ibid, 36:138.

⁴ Ibid, 36:139.

⁵ Klaas Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 395.

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:428.

earnestness of His prayer. This petition came from the heart of Christ, a heart severely pained by the loss of communion and fellowship with His Father. Of all the things which tormented the Savior on the cross, nothing compared with the suffering of His soul which flowed from the temporary abandonment by God. Our Lord's perfect sinless human nature, which from the very moment of conception had experienced a perfect relationship with God, experienced a spiritual shock by this forsakenness. This agonizing shock is unfathomable. Of all the pain and suffering in this world and even in hell, nothing approaches the soul pain and heartache that the Redeemer suffered on the cross.

Fourth, our Lord's prayer is set forth in the form of a question: "Why or for what purpose did You forsake Me?" The petition is not a complaint, nor is Jesus quarreling with God. The soul of the Savior, under the terribleness of divine wrath and the unimaginable pain of the abandonment of the Father's fellowship, cries out for an explanation. Does this question mean that Christ did not know the answer to this question? According to Scripture He most certainly did. He knew that He would be a sacrifice for sin and He knew all that that involved intellectually. But, when He experienced the darkness and horror of it and could sense that God was against Him as a sin offering, His soul shuddered. It cried out from the darkness. Thus, this loud cry was one of love, faith and affirmation, not one of anger or alienation. "The cry of dereliction expressed the unfathomable pain of real abandonment by the Father."⁷ "Whenever natural sense does miss the consolations of God, faith must grip more straitly to God, as Christ's faith does here, crying, *My God, my God*, when sense sees nothing but *forsaking*."⁸

(2) The significance and reason of the abandonment of Christ by the Father is taught throughout Scripture. Once we understand the nature of God; the heinousness, consequences or penalty of sin; and the fact that Jesus took upon Himself the sin and liability of punishment for the elect; the necessity of the abandonment becomes clear. The Bible teaches that God is perfectly righteous (Zeph. 3:5; Dt. 32:4; Ps. 89:14; 1 Jn. 1:5; Gen. 18:25; Rom. 2:5-6; 9:14). Therefore, God has an intrinsic hatred of sin; His whole being reacts against it (Ps. 5:4-6; Nah. 1:2; Rom. 1:18). Consequently, God in accordance with His own nature and character must punish sin (Ex. 23:7; 34:7; Num. 14:18; Nah. 1:3; Rom. 2:5-6). Jehovah is also infinitely holy (Ex. 15:11; Lev. 11:44; Isa. 6:3; Hab. 1:13; Ps. 5:4-5; Rev. 4:8). As a result God hates "all workers of iniquity" (Ps. 5:4-5). He cannot dwell with sinners (Hab. 1:13). He will not have any fellowship with darkness (1 Jn. 1:5-6) and will not even look upon evil.

The moral law of God, which is a reflection of God's nature and character, teaches that the penalty for sin is death (Gen. 2:17; Dt. 27:36; Ezek. 18:20; Rom. 1:18, 32; 6:23; Jas. 1:15; Rev. 20:14-15). Death refers to spiritual death or separation from God (i.e. the loss of favor, fellowship, friendship and communion); physical death; and the lake of fire or the second death (Rev. 20:14). When Adam ate the forbidden fruit and sinned against God, he was not immediately killed; but, he was expelled from the garden because he died spiritually even though his physical body was still alive (Gen. 2:17; 23-24; Rom. 5:12-19). He was separated from God. The fellowship that he had prior to his sin was broken. He suffered the necessary consequence of sin. As Paul says, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). The person who sins brings upon himself real guilt and liability of punishment. "For it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them'" (Gal. 3:10; cf. Rev. 20:15).

⁷ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 573.

⁸ David Dickson, *Matthew*, 398.

Because of God's righteous and holy character, which cannot change, and the penalty of the law, which is based on God's nature and thus is immutable, the only way that Jesus could eliminate the guilt and penalty of sin was to endure the full penalty in the place of the believing sinner. Since a crucial aspect of the penalty for sin was a loss of fellowship with God or spiritual death, Christ had to experience the abandonment of the Father on the cross. Keep in mind, the essence of spiritual death is separation from God. The Savior had to experience the damnation of God and thus He experienced the abandonment that sin deserves. "The sacrifice for sin must be put in the place of separation, and must bow to the penalty of death. By this placing of the Great Sacrifice under forsaking and death, it would be seen by all creatures throughout the universe that God would not have fellowship with sin. If even the Holy One, who stood the Just for the unjust, found God forsaking him, what must the doom of the actual sinner be! Sin is always, in every case, a dividing influence, putting even the Christ himself, as a sin bearer, in the place of distance."⁹

Jesus was abandoned by God on the cross because the only way that God could remain perfectly just or righteous, and justify or declare righteous those who believe in Christ, was to punish the Savior *fully* for their sins (cf. Rom. 3:21-28). Jesus so closely identified Himself with the elect sinners by taking upon Himself the imputed sins of the world that He had to experience the real horror of hell and separation from God that real sin deserves. "It is as perfect man that He has assured communion with the Father, unbroken save for that terrible moment of darkness upon the Cross, when, that He might be wholly one with man even in man's sin He knew the full horror of the loneliness which man has made for himself."¹⁰

(3) The significance and meaning of this separation for Christ is a difficult topic that merits our careful attention. There are a number of areas to consider. First, we will consider some common errors related to the separation that our Lord experienced on the cross. As we examine these errors we will sharpen our understanding of what actually occurred.

a) One error that has arisen regarding the separation is that it involved a mysterious, inexplicable rupture between God the Father and the divine nature of Christ. This view apparently arose out of a desire to honor the doctrine of the hypostatic union of the two natures (divine and human) in one person (Jesus Christ) and thus avoid the accusation of Nestorianism (i.e. the heretical doctrine that the Savior was two persons and not one). The problem with this view is that the unity of the trinity cannot be broken because it is unbreakable. The persons within the godhead could no more be separated than could God cease to exist or change in His divine Being.

The Bible teaches that God is immutable. That is, God is not subject to any change in His Being, attributes or perfections. The "immutability of God is clearly taught in such passages of Scriptures as Ex. 3:14; Ps. 102:26-28; Isa. 41:4; 48:12; Mal. 3:6; Rom. 1:23; Heb. 1:11, 12; Jas. 1:17.... The incarnation brought no change in the Being or perfections of God, nor in His purpose, for it was His eternal good pleasure to send the Son of His love into the world."¹¹ Further, God the Father and God the Son are not two separate beings different from each other as Jack Jones and John Smith. But, rather, they are two persons of one substance; God the Father and Jesus Christ are one (Jn. 10:30). Even while the Savior walked the earth, the eternal Son was

⁹ Charles H. Spurgeon, "Lama Sabachthani," 36:142.

¹⁰ L. W. Grensted as quoted in Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 43, footnote 71.

¹¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 58-59.

in the bosom of the Father (Jn. 1:18). Therefore, all concepts of a division between God the Father and God the Son are erroneous. Scripture cannot contradict Scripture.

b) Another more common error regarding the separation is that God the Father ceased loving Jesus while He was on the cross. Isaiah tells us what God thinks of Christ. The Father calls Him “My Elect One in whom My soul delights” (42:1). When the Savior was baptized by John, God publicly and audibly declared, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17). On the mount of transfiguration once again the Father said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 17:5). “In the quiet recess of eternity the Son was the object of the Father’s inexhaustible delight (cf. Prov. 8:30). The former’s re-affirmation, by means of baptism, of his purpose to shed his blood for a world lost in sin did nothing to diminish that love.”¹² God loved Jesus for who He was and He loved the Mediator for His redemptive obedience. Our Lord said, “Therefore, My Father loves Me, because I lay down My Life that I may take it up again” (Jn. 10:17; 5:20). Obviously, the Savior’s coming into the world to die on the cross for the sheep is something approved of and greatly loved by the Father.¹³ God so loved Christ’s sacrifice of Himself that He rewarded Him with “all authority over heaven and earth” (Mt. 28:18). The Redeemer even prays that God would love the elect as He has loved the Son (Jn. 17:23-26).

When Jesus hung on the cross, God did not stop loving Him but rather withdrew the active exhibition and all sensible tokens of that love. Similarly, when a total eclipse of the sun causes the earth to reside in a deep darkness, the sun is still shining in all its strength. God loved the Son and loved His obedience on the cross. But, because of the sin that was put on Christ, God had to forsake Him. Every display of divine love was withheld. This reality is hard for our finite minds to fathom. Normally, when God judges the sinner there is a holy hatred of both the sin and the sinner (Ps. 5:5; 45:7; Rev. 2:6, 15). But, in the case of the Redeemer, the person being punished for sin was Himself completely sinless (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22). Therefore, the withholding of the Father’s active love of Jesus while He was on the cross was purely judicial. The Father had to turn His face away from the Son because He was a substitute for sinners. “Christ was made *Sin* for us, a *Curse* for us; and therefore, though God loved him as a Son, he frowned upon him as a Surety.”¹⁴ “The fire of Heaven consumed the sacrifice. The tremendous manifestation of God’s displeasure against sin he endured, though in him was no sin.”¹⁵

Second, the separation of Jesus involved both positive and negative elements. Negatively, it involved the withdrawal or eclipse of the Father’s active love, fellowship, support and comfort of Christ. The Savior who had been and continued to be perfectly sinless and obedient to the covenant; who had enjoyed a fellowship and communion with God that no one had experienced; whose very life and existence involved a blessed unity of relationship with the Father had all of this turned upside down. “Throughout His life Christ felt this relationship, and this union, this fellowship with God. It blessed Him, it gave the blessing, it colored and determined the blessing,

¹² William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 216.

¹³ “Truly the Only Begotten was never more lovely to the Father than when he was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross! But we must look upon God here as the Judge of all the earth, and we must look upon the Lord Jesus also in his official capacity, as the Surety of the covenant, and the Sacrifice for sin. The great Judge of all cannot smile upon him who has become the substitute for the guilty. Sin is loathed of God; and if, in order to its removal, his own Son is made to bear it, yet, it is still loathsome, and he who bears it cannot be in happy communion with God. This was the dread necessity of expiation” (Charles H. Spurgeon, “Lama Sabachthani,” 36:140).

¹⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:429.

¹⁵ William Symington, *On the Atonement and Intercession of Jesus Christ*, 152.

it was the blessing. ‘Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard. But I knew that Thou didst always hear’ (John 11).”¹⁶ But on the cross the perfect covenant keeper, the One who always delighted to do the Father’s will (Heb. 10:7; cf. Jn. 8:26; 10:25), is regarded judicially as a covenant breaker. Therefore the blessed fellowship and communion had to be cut off. “He is sinless and trustful, and yet he has an overpowering feeling that God is absent from him.”¹⁷ He has drifted into the spiritual abyss, the unimaginable region behind the back of God. “In proportion as he is more fitted to receive the love of the great Father, in that proportion is his pining after it the more intense. As a Son, he is more able to commune with God than ever a servant angel could be; and now that he is forsaken of God, the void within is the greater, and the anguish more bitter.”¹⁸

Only a day before when Jesus had predicted that the disciples would be scattered He took comfort with these words: “You will be scattered each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me” (Jn. 16:32). Our Lord knew that the sense of God’s presence is the greatest source of comfort for believers. He knew that the saints could endure the severest trials and darkest times with God’s comforting fellowship. But when darkness enveloped the land and the Savior suffered as a substitute for sinners, He was forsaken of God. When the Redeemer came to Gethsemane and began to contemplate the cup of God’s wrath and this forsakenness, He fell on the ground in soul shock and pleaded with the Father. After He prayed, God sent unto Him a comforting angel to strengthen Him. But on Golgotha there would be no comforting angels, only the sense of abandonment. There was a total eclipse of the comforting love of God. The Father (figuratively speaking) had to turn His back to His beloved Son. “In responding to the call to the wilderness and identifying himself completely with sinners, Jesus offered himself to bear the judgment of God on human rebellion.... Now on the cross he who had lived wholly for the Father experienced the full alienation from God which the judgment he had assumed entailed. His cry expresses the profound horror of separation from God.”¹⁹

It is impossible for us to understand the pain and suffering that Jesus felt at this time because we are sinners and Christ was perfect. “What our Surety suffered in his soul must ever surpass all our powers of description or conception...we have the best reason to suppose that every variety of inward agony which a sinless spirit can possibly feel was experienced by him.”²⁰ “Our sins deserved that we should be utterly forsaken of God, for it behooved our Redeemer to taste...the hell of being *forsaken* ere we should be redeemed.”²¹

Positively, the Savior’s abandonment involved suffering the torments of hell. God’s holy wrath against sin was poured out on Christ as He hung on the cross. Jehovah’s fury was burning itself out in the very heart of Jesus. Our Lord’s sufferings were not the same in all respects as the sufferings of the damned in hell because subjectively, or personally, He was sinless. He could

¹⁶ Klaas Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 407.

¹⁷ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Lama Sabachthani,” 36:138.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 573. Mathew Henry writes, “That Christ’s being *forsaken* of His Father was the most grievous of his sufferings, and that which he complained most of. Here he laid the most doleful accents: he did not say, ‘Why am I scourged? And why spit upon? And why nailed to the cross?’ Nor did he say to his disciples, when they turned their back upon him, ‘*Why have ye forsaken me?*’ But when his Father stood at a distance, he cried out thus; for this was it that put *wormwood and gall* into the affliction and misery. This brought the waters in to the soul, Ps. lxxix. 1-3.” (*Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:429).

²⁰ William Symington, *On the Atonement and Intercession of Christ*, 150.

²¹ David Dickson, *Matthew*, 398.

not feel any remorse, regret, total despair or the fury of evil passions. The ungodly in hell are continuously tormented with unrestrained and unfulfilled sinful lusts. Their minds are continuously tormented by personal guilt and they are continually thinking “What if...”? As a Lamb without spot or blemish, the holy Savior could not experience that aspect of hell.

The Redeemer suffered the pain of hell for imputed sin (i.e. the elect’s sin, guilt and liability of punishment were reckoned to His account). Therefore, the agonies He suffered in His soul were different, yet not any less severe. While He could not experience hell as a personal sinner, who had wasted his life and had an eternity of regrets and despair, nevertheless as a sinless substitute there were aspects of His suffering that go beyond what a real sinner could experience. Because of His perfect holiness and His perfect relationship with the Father, God’s displeasure against sin pierced His heart far more than it would in a reprobate who had never really experienced God’s love. His acute sense of the Father’s holy hatred of the imputed sin that was upon Him; His extreme sensitivity to every aspect of the Father’s wrath and fury against sin; His holy knowledge of the vileness and heinousness of the sin reckoned to Him must have produced in Jesus a feeling of extreme sorrow and distress. Fallen men, whose moral sense is impaired by the pollution of sin, cannot comprehend the soul shock and agony that Christ endured in the outer darkness. Symington writes, “As such a feeling would accrue from the purity and ardour of his love to God and holiness, acting in his perfectly peculiar circumstances; so it would be increased by the pity and tenderness which he ever felt towards the objects of his redeeming love. A wise and good father is more deeply distressed by a crime which his beloved child has perpetrated, than by the same offense if committed by an indifferent person.”²² It is this suffering which makes the sacrifice of Christ perfect and efficacious.

In the Old Covenant era the clean animals that were offered in sacrifice were not rational creatures. They did not have minds capable of suffering anguish before an offended God. They could only feel the physical pain when their throats were cut by the priests. Therefore, the blood and suffering of bulls, sheep and goats cannot truly atone for sin (Heb. 9:12). But Christ was in all points just like us except He was without sin (cf. Heb. 4:15). Unlike those dumb sacrificial animals, Jesus was keenly aware of exactly what was going on. He could fully experience the wrath of God against sin. The wrath and alienation of God that He endured on the cross was real and it was horrific and agonizing to His rational, sinless, holy human soul. “He who did not spare His own son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him freely give us all

²² William Symington, *On the Atonement and Intercession of Christ*, 152. B. B. Warfield, in his excellent study of the “Emotional Life of Our Lord,” points out that Jesus came in “the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom. 8:3; i.e. the body and soul of unfallen man) because He had to suffer true human emotions under the curse of sin and judgment: “It is germane to our inquiry, therefore, to take note of the fact that among the emotions which are attested as having found place in our Lord’s life-experiences, there are those which belong to him not as man but as sin-bearer, which never would have invaded his soul in the purity of his humanity save as he stood under the curse incurred for his people’s sins. The whole series of his emotions are, no doubt, affected by his position under the curse. Even his compassion receives from this a special quality: is this not included in the great declaration of Heb. iv. 15? Can we doubt that his anger against the powers of evil which afflict man, borrowed particular force from his own experience of their baneful working? And the sorrows and dreads which constricted his heart in the prospect of death, culminating in the extreme anguish of the dereliction,—do not these constitute the very substance of his atoning sufferings? As we survey the emotional life of our Lord as depicted by the Evangelists, therefore, let us not permit it to slip out of sight, that we are not only observing the proofs of the truths of his humanity, and not merely regarding the most perfect example of a human life which is afforded by history, but are contemplating the atoning work of the Savior in its fundamental elements. The cup which he drank to its bitter dregs was not his cup but our cup; and he needed to drink it only because he was set upon our salvation.” (*The Person and Work of Christ* [Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed (1950)], 145).

things?” (Rom. 8:32). The sin placed upon the Savior was real sin. The wrath poured out upon the Redeemer was real wrath. And the suffering and agony that our Lord endured was real suffering. This truth is the heart of the gospel. As Edersheim notes,

Christ on the cross suffered for man; He offered Himself as a sacrifice; He died for our sins, that, as death was the wages of sin, so He died as the Representative of man—for man and in room of man; He obtained for man “eternal redemption [Heb. 9:12],” having given His life “a ransom, for many [Mt. 20:28].” For, men were “redeemed” with the “precious Blood of Christ, as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot [1 Pet. 1:19]”; and Christ “gave Himself for us, that He might ‘redeem’ us from all iniquity [Tit. 2:14]”; He “gave Himself ‘a ransom’ for all [1 Tim. 2:6]”; Christ “died for all [2 Cor. 2:15]”; “Him, Who knew no sin, God ‘made sin for us [2 Cor. 5:21]”; “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us” [Gal. 3:13]—and this, with express reference to the Crucifixion. This sacrificial, vicarious, expiatory and redemptive character of His [suffering and] Death, if it does not explain to us, yet helps us to understand, Christ’s sense of God-forsakenness in the supreme moment of the Cross.²³

(4) There are a number of things regarding Jesus’ suffering and cry of dereliction that ought to affect our Christian attitude and walk.

First, a knowledge and understanding of what Christ endured on the cross ought to increase our love and faithfulness to the Savior. “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19). A believer should always view the moral law and obedience to God through the lens of the suffering and death of Christ. Our Lord went through the outer darkness, the agonies of hell and separation from God on our behalf. We need to meditate on what the Redeemer did for us and contemplate the His amazing love. As Paul says, “For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we yet were sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:6-8). If we study and meditate on the cross we will keep before our hearts and eyes the love of Christ. Such thoughts will blossom into gratitude and affection. Gratitude and love will blossom into obedience or the fruits of faith.

Second, Jesus’ suffering and abandonment ought to be a great comfort and refuge for believing sinners. God sent the Son to suffer indescribable woes on our behalf. Our Lord willingly endured the cup of God’s wrath for us. If God was willing to send His Son to die such an accursed death in our place, shall He not also freely give us all things (cf. Rom. 8:31-32)? Because the Father was willing to forsake His only Begotten Son for us, we can rest assured that Jesus will never leave or forsake us (cf. Mt. 28:20). The Savior’s substitutionary atonement, which meets all the exigencies arising out of God’s nature and the consequences of sin, is the reason we are safe and secure. The sufficiency and perfection of the Lord’s atonement on Calvary repudiates all systems of works salvation (e.g., Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, Neonomianism, Shepherdism, the Federal Vision, etc). If you trust in the person and work of Christ you will have peace with God. “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified” (Gal. 2:16).

Third, the suffering that Jesus endured teaches us to hate sin by showing us the heinousness of sin in God’s sight. Our Lord was not crucified simply for dramatic effect. His

²³ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 606.

agony was not merely some kind of moral example. He suffered and died because of the sins of His people. If it were not for sin there would have been no bloody cross. Ultimately, it was sin that pounded the nails into the Savior's hands and feet. It was sin that pushed the crown of thorns into the Redeemer's head. It was sin that tore the flesh off of the Mediator's back. And it was imputed sin that separated Jesus from His Father's love, comfort and fellowship. Is it not obvious that every believer ought to hate the sin which tortured and murdered the precious Son of God?

When professing Christians have a light view of sin, it reveals a very deficient understanding of the cross. When people that claim to be believers wink at sin, treat the Son of God as a mere fire escape from hell or a cosmic Santa Claus who came so people could live lives of hedonism and material prosperity, one wonders if they even know the Savior. We must not harbor secret sins which brought agony to the heart of Jesus. We must not spend our time watching and delighting in Hollywood's or Broadway's elaborate presentation of actors mimicking wicked behavior. We must learn to see sin as God views it and hate it because it murdered Christ. Spurgeon writes,

O sirs, if I had a dear brother who had been murdered, what would you think of me if I valued the knife which had been crimsoned with his blood?—if I made a friend of the murderer, and daily consorted with the assassin, who drove the dagger into my brother's heart? Surely I, too, must be an accomplice in the crime! Sin murdered Christ; will you be a friend to it? Sin pierced the heart of the Incarnate God; can you love it? Oh, that there was an abyss as deep as Christ's misery, that I might at once hurl this dagger of sin into its depths, whence it might never be brought to light again! Begone, for thou hast crucified my Lord, and made him cry, "Why hast thou forsaken me?"²⁴

Fourth, the suffering and abandonment of Jesus give us a glimpse into the terrors of the final judgment. A time is coming in which the resurrected Savior Himself "will judge the world in righteousness" (Ac. 17:31). The one who endured hell and the forsaking of God will cast unbelievers into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Lk. 13:28). If you do not look to the Savior with faith and trust in His substitutionary atonement, then look with terror and dread at your own future. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). Unbelievers will not experience the shining smile of God on that day, but rather the curse for a life of sin, a life lived without faith in the Redeemer's precious blood. Jesus will frown upon you and say, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Mt. 7:23). "Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mt. 25:41). Then you will spend an eternity in agony and your soul will be continuously tormented with the "what ifs?" "Why did I ignore Jesus Christ to serve my own pleasures?" "Why could I not put aside the time to learn about Christ or go to church to hear the gospel?" "Why did I ignore the claims of the Son of God and play with foolish man-made philosophies?"

Right now is the time for you to understand that only Jesus' suffering and death deals with sin and the punishment that sin deserves. Therefore, it is time to forsake your sin and embrace the person and work of Christ. There are only two options. Either you trust in the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ and He pays the ultimate price for sin in your place; or, you will pay for your own sins in the outer darkness, loneliness and suffering of hell. "And

²⁴ Charles H Spurgeon, "Lama Sabachthani," 144.

the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night” (Rev. 14:11).

Fifth, Christians should study Christ and from His experience learn what to do when they feel forsaken. There are times when believers go through such severe trials that they may be tempted to give way to despair. In such situations we ought to first search our own hearts to make sure we are not harboring secret sins. Also, we must understand that some of the greatest saints in the Bible for a time did not sense God’s face shining upon them. Therefore, it does not need to be interpreted as some chastisement for personal sin. It may (like the case of Job) be God’s method for drawing us nearer to Him. In similar circumstances we need to look to the Lord and pray with fervency as Christ prayed.

Christians who suffer and feel that God’s face is turned away from them “should not write bitter things about themselves, and hastily conclude they are cast off forever, or are self-deceivers and have no grace at all. Let them still wait on the Lord and say with Job, ‘Though he slay me, yet I will hope in him’ (Job 13:15). Let them remember the words of Isaiah: ‘Who among you fears the LORD...? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God’ (Isaiah 50:10). And of David: ‘Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God’ (Psalm 42:11).”²⁵ Jesus as the “Captain” or “Lead Climber” of our salvation endured the real forsakenness and emerged victorious. Therefore, in similar circumstances when the sky is darkened in our lives, let us look to Him with a firm faith. Because of what Christ accomplished, every Christian can pray in this manner:

Precious, precious Redeemer, may I never, never lose sight of thee in this part of thy sufferings also; and especially eye thee still more when my soul is under the hidings of God’s countenance. Let me recollect, dearest Lord! That thou hast been forsaken before thy people, and for thy people; and here, as in all other instances, thou hast the pre-eminence, so as to sanctify even our momentary desertions to our good and to thy glory. Yes, precious Lord! Such are the blessed effects of thy desertion, that hence my soul learns, my God still supports, though my God may withhold his comforts. Jesus was forsaken for a season, that my soul might not be forsaken for ever. And grant me, dearest Lord, from thy bright example, to cast myself wholly upon thee, as thou didst upon thy Father, when all sensible comforts fail, convinced that thou ”art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever!”²⁶

The Reaction to the Cry of Abandonment

Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, “This man calleth for Elias.” And straightway one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink. The rest said, “Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him.” (Mt. 27:47-49; cf. Mk. 15:35-36)

The cry of Jesus out of the darkness elicits a challenge regarding Elijah. In Matthew and Mark, this reaction is directly connected to the offer of sour wine. In order to understand what is taking place in this scene we will examine three areas: (1) the circumstances of the reaction; (2) the reaction itself; (3) the relationship of the reaction to the sponge of vinegar.

²⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Mark*, 256.

²⁶ Robert Hawker, *The Poor Man’s Morning and Evening Portions* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, [1831] 1995), 286-287.

(1) The circumstances of the reaction were threefold. First, there was the startling, loud, agonizing cry of the Redeemer. Likely, this cry came after a very long period of sobering, terrifying darkness. Therefore, it is likely that our Lord's cry of dereliction in a sense "broke the ice" and set loose the tongues of Christ's enemies.

Second, it is probable though not explicitly stated that very soon after the Savior's cry of abandonment, the sun once again began to shine over Palestine. This assertion is supported by a number of inferences from Scripture. a) When Jesus died on the cross, which occurred only minutes after the cry of dereliction, the gospels tell us that many women were beholding Him from afar (Mt. 27:55; Mk. 15:40). Luke wrote: "But all His acquaintances, and the women who followed Him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching these things" (23:49). Further, the synoptic gospels say that the Roman centurion saw Jesus' death and the attending earthquake (Mk. 15:39; Mt. 27:54; Lk. 23:47). Therefore, the darkness was removed immediately before our Lord's death and not after He gave up His spirit. Thus, it is likely that the return of light over the land emboldened Christ's enemies to renew their mockeries. b) The Savior's shout of victory, "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30), tells us that our Lord's atoning work on the cross—His redemptive sufferings—were completed. Obviously, if the Redeemer's vicarious suffering and abandonment were over, then the attending darkness of hell and forsakenness would be theologically, biblically and chronologically inappropriate. The darkness passed because the suffering of abandonment had passed.

Third, the people who reacted to our Lord's cry of dereliction were probably Jews. Although Mark and Matthew are not specific and only say that "some of them that stood there," we believe the response is from the Jews for a number of reasons. a) It is not likely that the Roman soldiers were proficient in the Aramaic language. The soldiers, however, may have been recruited from the provincial areas of the Empire such as Syria and thus could have understood Aramaic. b) But, even if they did, they certainly were not familiar with current Jewish doctrine regarding the coming of Elijah in relation with the Messiah. The response clearly flowed from the Jewish messianic expectation at that time.

(2) Regarding the reaction of the Jews, commentators hold two very different opinions. The first view is that the hearers made an honest mistake because of the similarity between *eli* (My God) and *eliya* (Elijah). The bystanders thought they heard Elijah's name and therefore believed that Jesus was calling upon Elijah to come and save him. The second interpretation is that Christ's statement was deliberately twisted as a call for rescue from Elijah in order to continue the mockery that took place before the darkness. The second view makes more sense given the fact that: a) God's Word says that the Savior shouted these words. Therefore, the Redeemer's words were clearly heard by the people attending the crucifixion. b) It is extremely unlikely that a Jew would have mistaken Eli for the name of Elijah. c) Our Lord was quoting from Psalm 22:1. The Psalter was probably the most familiar section of Scripture to the Jews given its place in their liturgy. The Jews knew that Jesus was quoting from Psalm 22 in His cry to God. Therefore, on these grounds, we think it was likely that the Jews were making a coarse joke using bitter irony or sarcasm.

Earlier, the Jews had mocked the Savior by demanding that He prove His claims by coming down from the cross (Mt. 27:40, 42; Mk. 15:30, 32; Lk. 23:35). They also mocked Him by implying that if He really was the Son of God that God would give Him immediate deliverance. Now, after the sun reappears, they continue this type of mockery with a reference to Elijah. They were rubbing in the fact that Christ would not be delivered from death. Keep in mind that for the Jews at this time Elijah the prophet played a very important role in their

messianic expectations. They had over-literalized Malachi 4:5 regarding the coming of Elijah and were expecting Elijah to come from heaven to precede and help the Messiah. Ancient rabbinic writings speak of Elijah coming first to restore all things and to rescue the righteous.²⁷ The Jews were taunting our Lord by essentially implying that if Jesus was righteous and the genuine Messiah, then He must be delivered by Elijah. This mockery completed their deluded two-fold witness against Christ. They reasoned as follows, Jesus could not save Himself; therefore, He cannot be the Son of God. Elijah has refused to come to Jesus' aid; therefore, he cannot be the Messiah. Their perverted, darkened minds were still tormenting the Savior.

The fact that the mockery of the Savior continued after the three hours of darkness tells us something very disturbing about fallen human nature. It demonstrates that the apparent movements of the unregenerate toward pious thoughts and actions during times of crises are only temporary. The unexpected darkness had shut the mouths of the wicked. The unbelieving mob instinctively knew that silence was the proper response to the miraculous darkness. But this sobering event which stirred fear in their hearts did not lead the crowd to genuine repentance. As soon as the rays of the sun began to shine, their mocking tongues followed their blackened hearts.

This tragic reality has been observed in our own time during shocking disasters. When America was attacked by terrorists on September 11, 2001, the sarcastic mouths were silenced; the filthy tongues were curbed. People talked about God, prayer, love, community and spirituality. But the sobering effect of a great and shocking tragedy was only temporary. The natural man returns to his lusts rather quickly like a dog returns to its vomit or a pig to its wallowing in the mire (2 Pet. 2:22). Without a fundamental change of heart, it is only a matter of time before everything returns to business as usual.

(3) In the midst of the reaction we read about someone who takes a sponge, puts it on the end of a reed, fills it with vinegar and places it at Jesus' mouth, thus offering Him a drink. If we read Matthew and Mark, it appears almost to be purely an arbitrary act. The apostle John, however, clarifies matters by giving us an important detail. John 19:28-30 reads, "After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, 'I thirst.' Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, 'It is finished:' and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost." There are four things that are noteworthy regarding this incident.

First, note that the Savior completely ignores His tormentors. Instead, Christ was meditating on the Scriptures and preparing to speak the great words of victory: "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30). Calvin writes,

But instead of speaking to the deaf, he betook himself directly to God, and committed to his bosom the assurance of his confidence. He wished, indeed, that men should hear what he said; but though it might be of no avail to men, he was satisfied with having God alone as his witness. And certainly there is not a stronger or more decided testimony of faith than when a pious man—perceiving himself attacked on every hand, so that he finds no consolation on the part of men—despises the madness of the whole world, discharges his sorrows and cares into the bosom of God, and rests in the hope of his promises.²⁸

²⁷ See Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 507-508.

²⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:321.

When Christians are mocked and mistreated by wicked men simply for their faith in Christ, often the best thing to do is to remain silent. When people react to the truth of the gospel with hatred and violence, we must as it were shake off the dust from beneath our feet as a testimony against them (Mt. 10:14; Mk. 6:11; Lk. 9:5; 10:11; Ac. 13:51). When they know the truth intellectually and emphatically reject it and persecute believers, then there is no longer any point in attempting to reason with them. It is time, so to speak, to leave town.

Second, the Redeemer consciously fulfills prophecy. John says that Jesus cried “I thirst” specifically so that “the Scripture might be fulfilled” (Jn. 19:29).²⁹ This verse demonstrates that: a) Our Lord was thinking about the Bible and the prophecies concerning Himself while on the cross; and b) Christ had no problem whatsoever in taking direct action to make sure that every prophecy was fulfilled. Obviously, the Savior believed that the sovereignty of God, or His decretive will, did not overthrow or conflict with the will of men as true secondary agents. As the Mediator hung on the cross and knew that He was about to deliver up His spirit to the Father, He realized that Psalm 69:21 (“They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.”) had not yet been fulfilled. The soldiers (or the women of Jerusalem) had already offered Him gall to deaden His pain (Mt. 27:34; Mk. 15:23). Jesus, however, refused the gall. The offer of vinegar as a refreshing drink had not yet occurred. So our Lord said “I thirst” (Jn. 19:28), knowing that a Roman soldier would offer Him a drink. “Every part of the great sacrifice for sin was foreordained and arranged in the eternal counsels of the Trinity, even to the words which He was to speak on the cross.”³⁰

When we put John’s account together with Matthew’s and Mark’s records we can now see the relationship between the mockery and the offer of vinegar. It is very likely that one of the Roman soldiers being ignorant of first century Jewish interpretations and traditions regarding Elijah, took the mocking interpretations of Christ’s words at face value. Therefore, when the Savior said “I thirst,” the soldier “ran” to give Jesus a drink to preserve His life a little longer to see if Elijah would indeed deliver Him. Our Lord knew what the soldier was thinking and knew that His request would be granted. This interpretation is supported by the fact that both the one who gave the drink (Mk. 15:36) and the bystanders said immediately after the drink was given, “Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to save Him” (Mt. 27:49). The soldier probably said this out of ignorance, while the Jews were continuing their mockery.

The reason that most scholars believe that it was a Roman soldier who gave Christ a drink is that the soldiers would have brought provisions for a long day of guard duty. This would have included a large container of water mixed with sour wine (cf. Jn. 19:29). Thus, the soldiers who were near the cross had a drink available. Further, it is unlikely that a Jew would have been permitted to help himself to the Roman provisions. A Roman guard, either on his own initiative or under the direct orders of the centurion, gave Jesus a drink. Lenski writes,

Matthew and Mark report that one man gave Jesus the drink, while John uses the plural endings in the participle and in the main verb. Naturally one man performed the act; that others repeated it is unlikely and even unnecessary. This man must have been one of the four soldiers, for the vinegar, etc., belonged to them. John’s plural is explained when we note that this soldier

²⁹“‘I thirst’ would naturally have been said in a low voice so that it could be heard only by those near the Cross. That John should have specifically recorded this word is in keeping with the emphasis laid, throughout the Fourth Gospel, on the *humanity* of Jesus. As He asked the Samaritan woman for water when He was thirsty (4:7), so now” (J. H. Bernard, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2:635).

³⁰ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:359.

acted with the centurion's consent, who may even have bidden one of his men to act. The indefinite plural thus conveys the idea that the drink came from the soldiers; it was not merely the deed of one who was more tenderhearted than the rest.³¹

This view is supported by the fact that the centurion developed a very high opinion of the Savior during the Redeemer's crucifixion and death (cf. Mk. 15:39; Mt. 27:54; Lk. 23:47).

Third, the expression, "I thirst," demonstrates the reality and intensity of Jesus' physical sufferings. Because of the influence of Greek philosophy and the calm, patient manner in which the Savior endured His suffering, a heresy called docetism arose soon after the death of the apostles. "Docetism is the view that the body of Christ was not real but only seeming (Gk. *dokein*, 'to seem'), and so either the sufferings were only apparent, or else the redeemer who could not suffer was separate from the man in whom he appeared."³² The gospel accounts, on the contrary, make it crystal clear that our Lord really suffered on the cross.³³ The Redeemer felt a burning and consuming thirst. The great loss of blood during the crucifixion caused a severe dehydration. David referred to this radical dehydration in Psalm 22:15: "My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death." Interestingly, the "torments of hell are represented by a violent thirst, in the complaint of the rich man who begged for a drop of water to cool his tongue. To that everlasting thirst we had all been condemned, if Christ had not suffered on the cross, and said, 'I thirst.'"³⁴

Fourth, we can infer from the immediate context that one reason the Savior asked for a drink was to moisten and lubricate His parched mouth. Jesus wanted to loudly and clearly pronounce His victory over sin. "So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit" (Jn. 19:30). Our Lord did not ask for a drink simply to die but to speak. "He wants his lips and his throat moistened in order that he may do just what the synoptists report that he does, namely utter a loud shout..."³⁵ The incident regarding the Redeemer's thirst, the fulfillment of the last prophecy regarding His suffering and the moistening of the dying Savior's tongue form the transition from the loud cry of abandonment to the loud shout of victory.

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³¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1307.

³² H. D. McDonald, "Docetism" in Editors: Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1988), 201.

³³ "When the eternal Word became incarnate, He did not cease to be God, nor did He lay aside any of His Divine attributes; but He did become flesh; being made in all things like unto His brethren. He 'increased in wisdom and stature' (Luke 2:52); He 'wearied' in body (John 4:6); He was 'an hungered' (Matt. 4:2); He 'slept' (Mark 4:38); He 'marveled' (Mark 6:6); He 'wept' (John 11:35); He 'prayed' (Mark 1:35); He 'rejoiced' (Luke 10:31); He 'groaned' (John 11:23); and here, He 'thirsted.' *God* does not thirst; there is no hint (so far as we are aware) that the *angels* ever do; *we* shall not in the Glory (Rev. 7:16). But *Christ* did, as man, in the depths of His humiliation" (Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:242-243).

³⁴ Henry as quoted in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:359.

³⁵ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1306.