

Did God Forsake Jesus on the Cross? A Study of Psalm 22

By David F. Sims

As He was dying on the cross, Jesus said, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46). Many people read this statement and infer that God must have turned His back on Jesus, that God withdrew His presence from Jesus, or that somehow God forsook Jesus. A closer examination of the Scriptures, particularly the prophecy which Jesus quoted, will clarify the matter.

The primary problem with this Forsaken Theory is that it is based on assumption (Barnett, p. 113). There is no Scripture that states that God in any sense turned away from Jesus. In fact, there are Scriptures that state just the opposite. But once one assumes the Forsaken Theory, it leads to other non-Scriptural opinions of the death of Jesus, especially the imputation and substitution theories upon which Calvinism is founded.

Consider the prophecy which Jesus quoted...it is found in Psalm 22. In the days of Jesus, the Psalms were not yet numbered, nor known by any numbering system. "A psalm was identified by its subject matter, referring to some passage within it or by referring to the opening line" (Barnett, p. 114). We can do the same thing today. If I said, "When in the course of human events" an educated American should recognize this statement as the opening to the Declaration of Independence. If I said, "Four score and seven years ago" you might recognize that as the beginning of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. And so Jesus made reference to a particular Psalm by quoting its opening line, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?" In addition to quoting its opening line, He also referenced its final words, "He has performed it" when He said, "It is finished." It is therefore quite clear that Jesus was referring to this psalm, which is a Messianic prophecy, as He hung on the cross. "We know as a matter of fact that Psalm 22 was one part of the Scriptures Jesus recalled and applied to his own sufferings and death" (Weaver, 2000).

Why refer to this particular psalm? Read the psalm and you will see that it clearly and in great detail describes both the events of His crucifixion and the church age which His death would inaugurate. Surrounded by Jews as He hung on the cross, and having suffered all the inflictions which had been prophesied, Jesus brought to their minds this prophecy of what they would do to the Messiah, emphasizing that He was in fact the fulfillment of that prophecy. Any Jew familiar with the prophets who observed all that was done to Jesus could not help but recognize those things were prophesied and thus fulfilled.

When David penned the words of Psalm 22, he *felt like* he was alone and *forsaken* by God. His enemies surrounded him, he was in great peril, and God had not yet answered his cries for deliverance (Psalm 22:1-2). "Whatever the occasion in David's life that prompted the writing of Psalm 22, the prophet looked beyond it and saw the suffering and victory of his seed." (Hailey, 1987). But was David actually forsaken by God? No! God does everything in His Own time, including the answering of prayers. God would deliver David from his enemies, and David knew it. Sometimes we today feel like God is far away, or has even abandoned us...we especially feel this way when a loved one dies, or when all of our human

friends have left us alone. But no matter how alone and forsaken we may feel, God has never abandoned His people and will never abandon His people. The answer to our prayers for deliverance and comfort may not come right away or in the form which we desire, but God does hear our prayers and He does answer in His time and in His wisdom. David knew this when he wrote the psalm (Psalm 22:4-5). The psalm describes some of the things David felt and experienced, and prophetically it describes what would be done to the Messiah.

David considered himself “a reproach of men and despised by the people” (vs 6). Romans 15:3 says the reproaches of men fell on Christ. The cry of the masses to “Crucify Him!” clearly demonstrate that Jesus was despised by the people (Matthew 27:22-23). David said that people who saw him “sneer” and tell him to trust in the Lord for his rescue. That is exactly what they did to Jesus! “And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads...” (Matthew 27:39). The chief priests, scribes, and elders even quoted Psalm 22:8 specifically about Jesus. “If Jesus’ statement ‘why has Thou forsaken Me’ means that God had abandoned Him on the cross, it also means that *the Jews were correct in their opinion*. But that was only how it *appeared* to be to the Jews; they were wrong!” (Barnett, 116). In spite of the verbal abuse from men, David maintained his confidence, remembering that God had been with him since birth (vss. 9-10). The same is true of Jesus.

In verses 11-13, David continued his call to God and the prophetic description of his affliction. David likened his enemies to strong animals, both bulls and lions. Consider the strong enemies who put Jesus on the cross: the chief priests, the elders, the Pharisees, the scribes, Pontius Pilate, Herod, and the Roman soldiers. “Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole *Roman* cohort around Him” (Matthew 27:27). David also likened his enemies to dogs and evildoers (vss 16), which is descriptive of the ignoble crowd of bystanders, the mob of common Jews who cried out for His crucifixion (Acts 2:23).

David then described the anguish he felt (vss 14-15). All of his strength was gone, and he felt as “weak as water” and like his bones were out of joint and like his heart had melted away. His strength was dried up, as was his tongue, so he could hardly speak. These statements are certainly descriptive of the anguish Jesus experienced on the cross, who even cried out, “I am thirsty” (John 19:28).

The Psalmist claimed that his enemies had pierced his hands and feet (vs 16), perhaps as a lion’s teeth or a bull’s horns can pierce the flesh. The imagery is of being crippled and disarmed, totally defenseless... unable to fight back and unable to flee. But it is very literally fulfilled in the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross, who had nails driven through His hands and feet, the proof of which the disciple Thomas demanded to see, and which Jesus showed him (John 20:24-28).

So dried up was the flesh of David, and so tight was his skin against his inner parts, that he could perceive and count all of his bones (vs 17). Likewise our Savior, stretched and suspended upon the cross, felt the sensation of pain in every part of His flesh, even to the point that He could pinpoint pain in each bone. Yet none of His bones broken (John 19:31-37).

David says his garments were divided among his enemies. Perhaps David had been chased from his camp, and was forced to leave behind his possessions as he fled for his life. But even if that was not the case for David, it is quite literally fulfilled in Jesus, as the soldiers who crucified Him divided his garments into four parts and then cast lots for possession of the tunic (John 19:23-25), which John said was specifically in fulfillment of David's prophecy in Psalm 22:18.

Yet David maintained his faith and confidence, knowing that God had not departed far from him, and he repeated his cry for deliverance from the sword, the dog, the lion, and the wild oxen who afflicted him, and he knew that God's answer was forthcoming (vss 19-21). Is it even conceivable that Jesus was not just as confident in His deliverance? Jesus knew He would be raised up (Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 26:32) from the dead before He ever went to the cross. In anticipation of his pending deliverance, David promised to tell his brethren about God, and instructed everyone to praise and glorify Him (vss 22-23).

Now look very closely at David's next words in verse 24: **"For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; Nor has He hidden His face from him; But when he cried to Him for help, He heard."** While the forsaken theory says that God forsook Jesus on the cross, the prophecy very plainly states that God does not forsake the afflicted! This verse alone should be sufficient to prove that God did not forsake Jesus on the cross.

So David confidently sums up his pending and sure deliverance (vss 25-31), speaking prophetically of the Church which Jesus purchased with His blood. And David confidently regarded God's deliverance as already accomplished, though it was yet in the future, because it was a sure thing, concluding with these words: "He has performed it." In like manner, when Jesus fulfilled this prophecy, and all things had been prophesied of Him, He performed the "it" which David described, and Jesus said, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

And so we see that Psalm 22 is irrefutably a prophecy of the crucifixion of the Messiah. The Jews standing around the cross that day, who witnessed the abuses heaped upon Him, how he was surrounded by His enemies, how He was pierced with nails and spear, and how His garments were divided, could not help but realize that these events had been foretold. Even the Centurion and other guards standing there recognized this crucified Man as the Son of God (Matthew 27:54). And Jesus, by bringing to their minds this very specific prophecy of David from Psalm 22, made sure that everyone knew He was fulfilling it, and thereby proved with His dying words that He was, in fact, the Messiah and the Son of God.

Why would Jesus quote the opening and closing line of a Psalm if not for some benefit to the people listening at the time? Jesus was not asking a question to seek information as though He was ignorant of what was happening. He was still teaching the people. By drawing their attention to a Psalm that described the very scene before them, perhaps they could see that they were fulfilling prophecy at that very moment. They could look into the mirror of scriptures and see themselves there. They could also understand that Jesus was indeed the Christ because Psalm 22 was a prophecy of the Christ which, in turn, declared His Godhood. (Barnett, 115)

Apart from the prophetic psalm, there are other reasons why God would not have forsaken Jesus. For one, Jesus IS God, and God cannot forsake or deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13). Jesus said, "And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him" (John 8:29). Remember also that it was "by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" that Jesus was delivered up for death (Acts 2:23). If God would forsake the One who obeyed Him perfectly, what hope do the rest of us possibly have? Can we even rely confidently on such a God who might forsake us?

The Jews thought God had forsaken a dying criminal on the cross. They were wrong! There is simply no Scriptural reason to believe that God actually forsook Jesus on the cross, or turned His back on Jesus. Nor is there reason to believe that Jesus ever felt abandoned by God, since He Himself is God in the flesh, unless one is inclined to disregard the plain prophecy of Psalm 22 and other Scriptures, and to embrace the false doctrines of Calvinism which would impute man's sins to the Savior. There is no Scripture that says God turned away from Jesus, and there is a Scripture that says God does not turn away from the afflicted Messiah (Psalm 22:24).

References

Barnett, M. 1996. *The Person of Christ*. Preceptor: Beaumont, TX.

Hailey, H. (1987). "The Prophets Speak of Calvary." *Guardian of Truth*. XXXI (20), 610. Retrieved from <http://www.truthmagazine.com/archives/volume31/GOT031274.html>

Weaver, W. (2000). "They Know Not What They Do." *Guardian of Truth*. XLIV (6), 1. Retrieved from <http://www.truthmagazine.com/archives/volume44/V4403160001.htm>