

# The Death of Jesus

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[ 0 : 00 ] Last words matter. Last words carry weight and significance. We listen to the words of the dying because they're final.

! The last gasp of communication before the line cuts out. Every year on Good Friday, Christians remember the death of Jesus, his death on the cross, and all that it signifies.

And in the gospel accounts that record the crucifixion, Jesus speaks several times from the cross. And our focus this evening is on that famous cry that Mark and Matthew record in their gospels, Eloi, Eloi, Lema, Sabachthani.

Those watching the crucifixion thought that he was calling for Elijah the prophet to come and help him. But what he was really doing was quoting. He was quoting the psalm that we've just read and sang.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? I love a good quotation. As a preacher particularly, a good quotation can do a lot of heavy lifting for you, especially if it's one by C.S. Lewis.

[ 1 : 14 ] But why does Jesus quote this psalm on the cross? Why, as he succumbs to death and wrestles with the pain of crucifixion, the inevitability of death itself, and the misery of bearing the sins of the world, why does he quote this psalm?

We take seriously the words of the dying because they don't have much breath left. The words have to be chosen carefully.

So why does Jesus choose these words? The reason is that this psalm, written thousands of years before the cross by King David, is all about the cross.

When David wrote it, he was writing it about himself. But in the strange way that scripture so often works, David's experience was but a rehearsal for what his descendant Jesus experienced.

And Jesus, as he dies, sees that this song encapsulates all that is happening as he hangs on the cross on Golgotha's hill. This is not just a cry of despair.

[ 2 : 31 ] This is actually a cry that helps us unpack the cross itself, helps us understand just what the Son of God was experiencing and why.

It shows us principally two truths. One, that God does, in a sense, forsake Jesus on the cross. And two, that God also vindicates Jesus on the cross.

The psalm begins with these words that Jesus cries. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?

My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer. By night, but I find no rest. Originally, this was King David's cry. He was going through an experience where it seemed like God had abandoned him, was not listening to his cries for help.

Day and night, David was praying for rescue from the dark place that he was in. And God did not seem to be answering. And this was the experience of Christ on the cross.

[ 3 : 44 ] A greater king facing a greater trial and experiencing a greater sense of abandonment. Now, Christians testify that Jesus is God himself.

He is the eternal son, the second person of the triune God, the word of God who is God. Jesus' divine nature was not being severed from him in this experience.

That's not what the cry of forsakenness is about. Rather, Jesus, in his human nature, like David, feels abandoned in the darkness of his trial.

Jesus, as a man, had experienced a closeness with God that was unparalleled. He had been conceived through the Holy Spirit. He was said to have been filled with wisdom and the grace of God was upon him.

Even as a young boy, he was able to teach the teachers in the temple because he was his father's son. He walked with God. And at crucial moments, the father had affirmed that Jesus was his son.

[ 4 : 54 ] He had spoken to him when Jesus was baptized, saying, This is my beloved son. Listen to him. And again, when Jesus was transfigured.

But this closeness, he does not now feel. His friends have fled from him. One of them betrayed him. Another denied that he even knew him.

And most of the others have run away in fear. His people have called for his death. And the Roman authorities, knowing his innocence, have crucified him all the same.

It is a dark experience. On top of that, Jesus is bearing the wrath of God for our sins. He's being crucified in our place.

Forsaken is a covenant word. A word of covenant curse. Paul writes in Galatians, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

[ 5 : 59 ] For it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree. Jesus is bearing the curse we deserve as sinners. But he was innocent.

The charge of our legal debt is nailed to the cross with him. He's taking it instead of us. The innocent for the guilty. The perfect for the imperfect.

The righteous for the sinner. This is what it means for Christ to feel forsaken. As the old Puritan writer David Dixon wrote, Christ, as man lying under the curse of the law for us, was really deserted and forsaken for a time.

In regard of all sensible consolation. In regard of all that he felt and experienced. He was by way of punishment for our sins. And by way of cursing our sin in him.

Really in our stead for a while deprived as man of the sense of the comfort of his own Godhead.

And yet, in this experience of forsakenness, Christ did not ultimately doubt.

[ 7 : 17 ] He could have expressed that feeling of forsakenness without quoting. But he does quote. And that's because the quotation brings with it the whole psalm.

The psalm oscillates between the experience of forsakenness and the hope that the king has in God. A hope that Jesus shows he maintained by quoting from this song.

And so the psalm continues. David and Jesus know that God saves his people.

He's done it in the past. Most notably at the Exodus where he delivered them from their slavery in Egypt. But at other times as well. Throughout the Bible story he would raise up a deliverer.

And save them from their enemies. And Jesus remembers that God does this. And remembers that God is enthroned on the praises of Israel. That's covenant language again.

[ 8 : 33 ] God is a covenant God. Who in the past has saved his people. So that they might be his people. And praise his name. David knows this.

And Jesus confesses this. And yet still wrestles. Where is God? But I am a worm and not a man, he says. Scorned by everyone.

Despised by the people. All who see me mock me. They hurl insults, shaking their heads. He trusts in the Lord, they say. Let the Lord rescue him.

Let him deliver him. Since he delights in him. Jesus feels like a worm, not a man. Absolutely dehumanized by his suffering.

By the torture and the cruelty. Those who look at him, they mock him. They mock his faith in God.

And whilst this was true for David, it becomes even more true for Jesus.

[ 9 : 37 ] And Matthew records how the teachers of the law and the elders of the Jews mocked him. They said, he saved others, but he can't save himself.

He's the king of Israel. Let him come down from the cross and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him. For he said, I am the son of God.

In a strange irony, these people who knew Psalm 22 better than anyone end up becoming the very people that it speaks of.

The very people who mock God's suffering king. And yet the king still retains his hope. Yet you brought me out of the womb, he says.

You made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast. From birth I was cast on you. From my mother's womb, you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

[ 10 : 38 ] David, and even more so Jesus, remembers not just God's faithfulness and salvation in the past, but his own experience of his relationship with God.

Jesus, as we've said, was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He trusted in God from the earliest age. From the womb, God has been his God.

Incidentally, this can also be true for the children of believers and is why we baptize infants. But if it can be true for God's people as children, it is even more so for the son of God himself.

And that is why the king continues his prayer that God would not be far from him. When everyone else has abandoned him, he rests in the one whom he knows will not.

And yet, even still, the experience of Christ is one of continued forsakenness. The enemy is closing in.

[ 11 : 44 ] Many bulls surround me, he says. Strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths against me.

It might seem like an odd image that doesn't bear much relevance to us, but actually the reference to bulls of Bashan is really important. Bashan means the place of the serpent.

And in the Old Testament, it was associated with evil kings who were particularly associated with the spiritual enemies of God's people. It was associated with spiritual rebellion.

And it was associated with death itself. Bashan is near the place where Jesus made his declaration that he would build his church and the gates of Hades, the realm of the dead, would not overcome it.

Michael Heisser writes, Simply put, if you wanted to conjure up images of the demonic and death, you'd refer to Bashan. If it's true that elements of Psalm 22 prefigure the crucifixion, which they do, it makes sense that a reference to Bashan would be part of that.

[ 12 : 59 ] So why does it make sense that Bashan would be referenced in a psalm about Jesus' death? Well, it's because Jesus' death was the crucial moment in the spiritual war which has been raging since Adam was tempted into sin by the serpent in the garden.

The serpent, the devil, has been waging war on humanity ever since the fall of humanity in Eden.

All of human history is a story of a spiritual battle going on in the world.

And on the cross, it looked very much like the spiritual powers of evil would win the ultimate victory by killing God's king, by crucifying God's own son.

As Jesus said when the religious leaders came for him, this is your hour when darkness reigns. He wasn't just being poetic. This was the hour when the devil thought he had triumphed.

He would kill God's son. God's kingdom would never come. Peter, in his first letter, describes the devil as being like a lion on the prowl looking for someone to devour.

[ 14 : 19 ] He's probably getting that image from here. This psalm where bulls of Bashan and lions surround God's king to kill him. This is the cross.

The hour when darkness triumphed. And notice how David's psalm reads like a description of that triumph, a description of the crucifixion.

I'm poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax and it is melted within me. My mouth is dried up like a pot shirt and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.

You lay me in the dust of death. Jesus, his blood pours out. And when he dies, blood will pour out of his side with water when he's pierced by a spear.

His bones are all out of joint as his body hangs broken on the tree of crucifixion. His heart melts as he wrestles with this experience of abandonment.

[ 15 : 21 ] His mouth dries up like a fragment of pottery. As he dies, he even says, I thirst. And in the end, he is indeed laid in the dust of death.

Death is the curse of sin. Out of the dust we were made, but because of sin, to dust we all return.

And Jesus, the Son of God, faces a death that he does not deserve because he was without sin.

Dogs surround me, says the psalm. A pack of villains encircle me. They pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display. People stare and gloat over me.

They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment. The psalm introduces this other animal image for the enemies of Jesus. The dogs.

Unlike our own culture where dogs are sometimes valued more highly than people, dogs were not man's best friend in ancient Judea. They were wild and they were unclean.

[ 16 : 28 ] And here, the enemies of the king are like a pack of dogs ready to devour. And the reference to piercing seems to particularly anticipate the crucifixion and the nails that were plunged into the hands and feet of Jesus.

Benjamin Glad writes, the enemies are like vicious animals who puncture his hands and feet. In reality, of course, it was the Roman soldiers who nailed Jesus to the cross.

But behind them was this animalistic kingdom of darkness. Throughout the Bible, the enemies of God are presented like animals.

In Daniel's prophecy, for example, of God's king, the coronation of the son of man, there are other rival kingdoms, kingdoms of darkness, and they're presented like animals, like beasts, because the kingdom of darkness is inhuman.

It is monstrous. And we see it all around us. That is the world that we live in. A world where wars rage. A world where death continues to reign.

[ 17 : 44 ] A world where violence and cruelty and suffering continue as sordid realities that we have to bear with. Only an ostrich could deny the darkness of the world.

And if we don't bury our heads in the sand, it's clear that this world of ours is in thrall to darkness. Just to take one recent example of this, because I was reading about it today, and it's a harrowing example, is the grooming gangs across the UK, which have perpetrated some of the most horrific crimes.

And in many cases, it seems like the police and authorities have colluded and covered up the evil that has been happening, or at the very least decided just not to get involved. And this is something that's happened to young girls, and people haven't stepped in to deal with it.

It's examples like that which show us, and that's just one of many examples in our world and in our society which we can take, that show us we live in a dark, dark world under the power of darkness. That same power of darkness that thought it had triumphed over Jesus when he was crucified. We live in a world that is so often in thrall to the inhuman kingdom that resists God and resists his goodness, that resists the Son of Man, Jesus.

[ 19 : 10 ] Look at how the kingdom of darkness treats him. It barter for his clothes as he dies. Christopher Ashe writes, the mocking crowd, dismissing the desperate and despised figure, focuses instead on his clothing, which they think might still have some value.

It's a sad day when a man's clothing is considered more valuable than the man. This is the low value that they set on him, and so they roll dice to see who gets what.

As the spiritual enemies of God and of this world seem to be victorious, the king has one last plea. But you, Lord, he says, do not be far from me. You are my strength.

Come quickly to help me. Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs. Rescue me from the mouth of the lion. Save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

Perhaps you, at times yourself, feel forsaken by God. But perhaps you've followed him for a long time but are in a season where you cannot see him, cannot hear him, and feels like he's abandoned you.

[ 20 : 24 ] Or perhaps you've never followed him, but you wouldn't because if he is there, then he's not made himself known, and he's not made life for you easy. Or perhaps you simply look at the world that we live in and wonder, how could there be a God in all of this?

If you feel that God has forsaken you, Jesus understands. Now, it's nothing to the sense of forsakenness that Jesus experienced, but the fact that Jesus did means that Jesus knows exactly what it looks like to feel abandoned by God, to feel that God is no longer there, to feel that darkness is the victor.

But the beauty of the cross is that darkness does not win. That even though it seems like God is not there, he is.

God vindicates his son and does not forsake him. And that gives us hope that God does not forsake his people, he vindicates them.

On Good Friday, we remember the death of Jesus, but in a way, we cannot do justice to it without looking ahead to what happened three days later. One of my favorite films is *The Princess Bride*.

[ 21 : 44 ] There's a moment in it when the grandfather, who is telling his grandson the story of Princess Buttercup, interjects in the middle of his flow and says, at this point, Buttercup doesn't die, to make sure the boy who looks a little nervous knows that it's all going to be all right.

Even though we know the Easter story, I sometimes feel like I'm making a similar interjection when we consider the resurrection on Good Friday. It's a few days early, but it is important to do so.

Because without it, Jesus would have been abandoned.

He would have been truly forsaken. As it is, Jesus did experience forsakenness for a moment, but not forever. God did not abandon him.

I will declare your name, he says to my people. In the assembly, I will praise you. You who fear the Lord, praise him. All you descendants of Jacob, honor him.

Revere him, all you descendants of Israel. For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one. He has not hidden his face from him, but has listened to his cry for help.

[ 22 : 53 ] Why does Jesus quote Psalm 22? Because he knows where his experience of forsakenness is heading. The devil thought that he had won, but this was in fact the moment of his downfall.

Tim Keller writes, on the cross, Christ wins through losing, triumphs through defeat, achieves power through weakness, and service comes to wealth via giving all away.

The cross is not the end. By dying for sins and bearing the curse, Jesus wins.

Because sin's power is now broken. Death, which is the curse of sin, its power is broken. That's why Jesus can rise three days later.

The power of death has ended. And the power of the enemy has also been broken. Because Jesus has now made it possible for sinners to be forgiven and to receive eternal life.

[ 24 : 04 ] This is the point that Paul makes in his letter to the Colossians. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us.

He has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and the authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

The powers and the authorities are the spiritual enemies of this world. And so the sources of darkness in this world, sin, death, the devil, have lost their sting.

They have no power now. Or at least, their power has been broken and is limited until the day that Jesus returns. And this is why Jesus, the king, can declare God's praises and his name to his people.

Because God has not abandoned him. God has not hidden his face from him. God has listened to his cry for help.

[ 25 : 14 ] And though Jesus did, of course, have to experience the cross and the wrath of God for our sins, he was raised from the dead. He was not abandoned.

He was not forsaken. As Psalm 16 puts it, anticipating the resurrection. And if you're at Merchant City Church on Sunday, that's what we're going to be thinking about. Therefore, my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices.

My body also will rest secure because you will not abandon, it's the same word as forsaken in Psalm 22, you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay.

Jesus was vindicated. And so Psalm 22 continues. From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly.

Before those who fear you, I will fulfill my vows. The poor will eat and be satisfied. Those who seek the Lord will praise him. May your hearts live forever.

[ 26 : 14 ] All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord. And all the families of the nations will bow down before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.

This Psalm is really important because it links the suffering of the king and his eventual vindication by God to the whole world turning to God.

The cross is how the ends of the earth are able to come and know God. And all of us by nature we're sinners.

that means that all of us stand under God's covenantal judgment. We stand accused and deserving of justice.

And so we are by rights forsaken by God because we have forsaken him. But on the cross Jesus was forsaken for a time so that all who placed their faith in him would not be.

[ 27 : 23 ] would not face the justice of God but would instead experience the love of God. In this world where darkness and death and evil continue to have power though that power has been broken by the cross the cross calls us to the one who gives us hope of a world where there is no darkness there is no evil there is no death.

A world where the spiritual enemies of humanity have been cast out forever. Paul says in Philippians that because Jesus went to the cross and perhaps he is reflecting on this psalm also God has now exalted Jesus to the highest place and given him the name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and

every tongue acknowledge that Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

In other words because of the cross Jesus is now acknowledged as the king of all creation and the cross has been his road to victory.

He has triumphed through death and received a kingdom and at his name every knee will bow either now recognizing that he has died for you or in the future when he returns and it's too late.

And so the psalm ends all the rich of the earth will feast and worship all who go down to the dust will kneel before him those who cannot keep themselves alive posterity will serve him future generations will be told about the Lord they will proclaim his righteousness declaring to a people yet unborn he has done it.

[ 29 : 25 ] The psalm is ending by saying that everyone everyone will kneel before the Lord everyone will kneel before Jesus at the name of Jesus every knee will bow.

And the very very last line of the psalm is this he has done it. I'm not alone in thinking that another of Jesus' words from the cross is alluding to this.

Jesus says as he dies it is finished. He has done it. He has won the victory. The serpent may have bitten his heel but he has crushed the serpent and defeated death and the devil.

there are times when it truly does feel like God is not there or when it truly does feel like there's no God at all.

Times when we do feel abandoned and forsaken or when we look at this world and despair because of the darkness. the beauty of Good Friday the beauty of the cross and the beauty of this psalm is it teaches us that God is present.

[ 30 : 43 ] God is working and God has not abandoned you nor has he abandoned this world. Jesus was forsaken so that you might not be so that you might receive his gift of eternal life and forgiveness for sins.

We do live in a dark world and some of us will know the depths of that darkness more than others but Jesus has experienced the depths of that darkness for us has felt the full onslaught of evil for us and the full weight of God's justice for us so that we might have a hope of a world free of it all.

The cross frees us from all these things and invites us into a new world into a new hope and this is what we celebrate when we say with Jesus it is finished he has done it.

and if you trust him follow him know him love him and worship him and he has done it for you and you will live.

God has not forsaken you he has not hidden his face from you he loves you and he will never let you go.

[ 32 : 13 ] Let me pray.