

# The Last Words of Jesus

## *“Forsaken!”*

Psalm 22:1-2 and Mark 15:33-39

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*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*  
(Mark 15:34)

**T**here are some things I almost wish Jesus had not said. Topping the list might be this fourth word from the cross:

*“My God, my God,  
why have you forsaken me?”*

“In the entire Bible there is no other sentence so difficult to explain,” admitted James Stalker in his classic book, *The Trial and Death of Jesus Christ*.

He continued, “The first thought of a preacher on coming to it is to find some excuse for passing it by, and after doing his utmost to expound it he must still confess that it is quite beyond him.”

You can appreciate the problem. Our faith is focused in the

Cross of Christ. We gather around our crucified Lord and listen to his final words – promising hopeful words. But right in the middle we hear not assurance, but the anguished cry of the forsaken. And we are mystified, even terrified!

We’ve always drawn strength from the confidence of Jesus. *We* may be uncertain, but *Jesus* – never! His assurance has always put solid ground beneath our feet. He has been our steady point in a turbulent world.

Yet, here at the end when the climax is reached, when we desperately need Jesus, everything seems to come unraveled.

*“My God, my God,  
why have you forsaken me?”*

Jesus – “*forsaken*”? Hearing that, the earth moves, the stars fall, the sky darkens. If in the end Jesus was unsure, then what will happen to us when our time comes? If Jesus gave way, where shall we stand, what harbor shall we seek in a wildly tossing sea?

### **A Literary Reference?**

This cry of the forsaken is the most troubling word in the Gospel. It *is* mystifying! Some find hope in a possibility that the anguished cry “*forsaken!*” might simply be a literary reference.

Praises be, it is literary! A little searching uncovers Psalm 22.

Read for yourself the grim precision with which this Psalm describes the trauma of crucifixion. And yet this Psalm was written centuries before crucifixion was devised as a means of execution!

The theme of Psalm 22 was not lost on the early church. They used the Psalm liturgically when the Cross of Jesus was considered.

Psalm 22 opens with the exact words heard from Jesus’ lips,

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

From his own pit of hell the Psalmist contends with the terror

of being forsaken by God. That’s how Psalm 22 begins. But now, listen to the way it ends!

*“Dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations...*

*Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord.*

*They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn – for he has done it.”*

(Ps. 22:28, 30-31)

The point? This Psalm begins with God-forsakenness, but ends with God-confidence. If it can be shown that Jesus was simply referencing Psalm 22, then this troubling fourth word from the cross can be heard not as the cry of the forsaken, but as the creed of the faithful.

Yes, and we could be rescued from the embarrassment of following a Lord who appears to have faltered at the end. If Jesus’ fourth word is intended to remind us of Psalm 22, then we are reassured God is on the throne and all is well.

Appealing as all this sounds, it won’t wash, not quite that simply anyway. Psalm 22, like all the rest of the Old Testament, was written in Hebrew. For the Jew, Scripture was *always* read, memorized and spoken in Hebrew.

The point? Mark is at pains to tell us *exactly* what Jesus said on

that occasion: “*Eloi, Eloi, lama, sabachthani?*” That’s *not* Hebrew – it’s Aramaic! It’s the language Jesus spoke every single day of his life.

In Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ*, you hear these exact words spoken *in Aramaic* by Jesus on the cross. Had our Lord been referring to Psalm 22 as an affirmation of his faith, he would have quoted the text in *Hebrew* not in Aramaic. And Mark would surely have noted *that*.

It comes to this. When Jesus utter the cry “*forsaken!*” he spoke for himself in his mother tongue, *sabachthani*. “*Forsaken*” was not literary – it was literal. Jesus owned it!

## **Separated by Sin**

His cry was real and came from His gut. Jesus *experienced* God-forsakenness! But Why? How? For what reason?

The earliest explanation, the one developed most thoroughly in the New Testament, explains that in his death Jesus took upon himself the sins of the entire world.

This was Paul’s astonishing claim. He said, God “*made Jesus*

*to be sin who knew no sin*” (II Cor. 5:21). By coming to us “*in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh*” (Rom. 8:3). Through the sacrifice of Christ, God defeated sin “*nailing it to the cross*” (Col. 2:14).

“*Christ died for our sins,*” says one of the Bible’s earliest confessions (I Cor. 15:3). Jesus became “*a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree’*” (Gal. 3:13). On the cross, then, Jesus experienced the full weight of sin’s curse and consequences.

And what consequences are these? Of all the grim effects sin works in our lives, let’s focus on one experience with which each of us can probably identify. Sin creates an ever-widening gulf between ourselves and God, ourselves and others, and yes, even a division within ourselves.

For example, a person who has been unfaithful in marriage is inevitably distanced from his or her spouse. Often – and rather quickly thereafter! – that person goes missing from church.

This is probably because church represents God’s Holy presence. Sin by its very nature wants nothing to do with the Holy – the sense of the presence of God.

Instead, as sinners we try to put as much distance as possible between ourselves and God.

Sin separates us from others, because sin separates us from God. Follow this clue. The New Testament says Jesus took upon himself the weight of *all human sin*.

Try to conceive such a burden. Try to sense the separation He felt from God. Jesus “*who knew no sin*” was “*made to be sin*” (II Cor. 5:21) for us and all the world. Doesn’t it stand to reason that He would experience ‘God-forsakenness’ to a degree beyond our conceiving?

This begins to help us grasp why Jesus, especially Jesus – in fact, *only* Jesus! – could split the air with the cry, *sabachthani* “*Forsaken!*” Jesus was the living and dying embodiment of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant (Is 53:4,5).

*“Surely, he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God and afflicted.  
But he was wounded  
for our transgressions,  
he was bruised  
for our iniquities...”*

It’s our sin that put Christ on the cross! That film, *The Passion*, still stirs debate about the question, ‘Who killed Jesus?’ Who was

responsible for Jesus’ death, the Jews, the Romans...who?

I was touched to learn that Mel Gibson, the film’s director, refused to put himself into his own film...*except for one scene*. It’s a close up of *Mel’s* hands that are seen nailing Jesus to the cross! He later explained in an interview, “It’s *my* sin, that put Jesus there.”

### All the Way Down

In the midst of his anguish, Jesus pleaded, “*Why?*” And because he did, we feel less alone, less isolated, less guilty when *we* ask ‘Why?’ Christ is with us in our questionings and especially with us in our uncertainties.

That’s why I was wrong to say at the start of this sermon, “I wish Jesus hadn’t said this.” The truth is I am eternally grateful Jesus uttered the word “*Forsaken!*” – experienced it Himself, owned it!

Christ’s ‘forsakenness’ is at the heart of the gospel.

The ancient church recognized this as the Apostles’ Creed took its final form in the fourth century. That’s when the church added to the Creed the phrase “He descended into hell.” Hell *is* utter ‘God-forsakenness.’

Still today we affirm our faith using the Apostles’ Creed. Still

today we repeat this difficult and for many mysterious phrase. Let's invite John Calvin to help us understand this confusing phrase.

Calvin connected the church's phrase "He descended into hell" with the Bible's fourth word from the cross, "*Forsaken!*" In the moment of His cry, "*My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me,*" Christ "descended into hell" – into utter God-forsakenness.

But why this dreadful descent to the depths?

It's because our Lord was unwilling that any of us should be out of his reach merely because we may experienced a deeper 'hell' in our lives than did Christ himself. In his dying, Jesus plunged into the most terrifying depths to rescue us.

Many years ago my sister and her three small children visited us and our two small children. We went boating on a lake and stopped off on a small island. The kids took off their life-preservers and scampered about. I flopped down on my wife lap for a little snooze.

Just as I began to doze off I was rudely jolted. I heard Jan cry out. Then my 'pillow' leaped up and my head hit the sod. I gathered enough composure to grumble, "Hey, what's going on...?"

That's when I saw Jan leap into the murky water fully clothed, submerge for a long moment, and then finally resurface lifting out a drenched and panicked five-year-old niece.

Daphne had slipped off the bank, couldn't swim and would have drowned if Jan had not gone down to get her.

Christ has gone down to get us! He descended into the depths of our sin to rescue us!

## **For You and For Me**

My theology professor in Scotland, Dr. Thomas Torrance, told us of a woman in his first 'wee kirk in the Highlands.' She was forever chattering on about "How *beautiful* Jesus' crucifixion was."

Exasperated, Torrance got hold of a print of Matthias Grunewald's shockingly realistic painting, *The Crucifixion*.

When next the woman came by, they studied the ghastly picture together in silence. Then Torrance said quietly,

*"Madam, the only thing 'beautiful' about the crucifixion is that Christ endured that absolute hell for you."*

When I meditate on Jesus' cry of dereliction – "*Forsaken!*" I relate this fourth word from the cross to the phrase in the Apostles' Creed:

"He descended into hell."

Down the decades it's become a personal devotional habit of mine when repeating the Apostles' Creed to add under my breath two little words: "He descended into hell" ..*for me.*