

A Question from the Cross

Mark 15:29-34

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“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These words are difficult for a Christian to hear. They are raw and threatening, like an open wound. They sound like words of despair, of hopelessness, of doubt even, which, of course, is just what they are. Most difficult of all, the question hangs in the air unanswered.

We are never very good at letting those we admire be fully human, shed human tears, or express human agony. And when the one we hear expressing despair is Jesus, it is not just our view of him that can be shaken, but our view of God and our view of ourselves as well. If Jesus doubts, even for a moment, it can seem like enough to scatter our light and fragile faith.

In recent years, a number of authors, sometimes dubbed “the New Atheists,” have written extensively about their conviction that there is no God because belief in God is “unreasonable” and not consistent with modern science. Their writings have gotten a lot of attention. (The kind of skepticism they represent is nothing new. In the 1920s, the renowned theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, asked how one can continue to believe in God in the age of the wireless radio.) For most people, however, questions about the existence of God are not the result of intellectual inquiry. Instead, such questions arise out of human experience, particularly the experience of suffering or tragedy. It is the age-old question, which can be traced back at least as far as the Old Testament book of Job: Why do bad things happen to good people? That question appears in the midst of life. It is life, not theory, that gives rise to doubt. In most instances, the greatest obstacle to faith is not belief’s irrationality, but life’s injustice. So Jesus’ words on the cross are a response to the greatest threat to faith there is—life’s injustice and the apparent absence of God. And Jesus does not banish the darkness with a statement of faith. Rather, his response is an anguished question, and an unanswered question, at that.

It is not surprising, then, that Jesus’ question from the cross is seldom left to stand in its stark and raw simplicity. Biblical commentators and preachers alike often interpret his question in ways that make it at least somewhat easier to hear. We are reminded by some that Jesus’ words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” are the first words of the Psalm 22, a psalm of lament. Lament is a genre that is generously represented in the Bible. Fully one third of the psalms are psalms of lament. There is also an entire book of the Bible devoted to lament. It is the Old Testament book appropriately entitled Lamentations. In fact, there are more prayers of lament in the Bible than there are prayers of praise.

Laments follow a particular pattern that is reflected in Psalm 22. First, a lament typically begins with an expression of grief and consternation that God does not seem to be doing God’s job, usually accompanied by an insistence that God be God. The first verses of the psalm are an example:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest. (Psalm 22: 1-2)

Then, a lament turns to pleas for God's help:

But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid! (Psalm 22:19)

Finally, a lament ends with an expression of affirmation and trust, often including a reminder of how God has been faithful in the past:

You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
Stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.
(Psalm 22:23-24)

One might summarize the movements of a lament in this way: First, "God, you are not doing your job." Second, "God, you need to do your job." Third, "I am confident you will do your job, because you have in the past."

The point here is that Jesus knew this pattern of lament, as would his hearers. Jesus quotes only the beginning of the psalm, but he also knows how it ends. It begins with a most despairing question, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" but it ends with a great affirmation of faith. And those who hear his anguished question from the cross would also know how the psalm ends. Even if only the agony of the psalm is voiced, the concluding affirmation would be supplied by the mind's ear of the person hearing Jesus. That is one way people have come to terms with Jesus' expression of desolation.

Others have come to terms with the challenge of Jesus' question from the cross in a somewhat different way. They point out that as despairing as these words sound, they are still words of a believer, even in pain still directed to God. It is, after all, "*My God, my God*" to whom he cries.

Jewish author Elie Wiesel, who as a boy was imprisoned in the concentration camp at Auschwitz, tells a story that reflects some of this same dynamic:

Inside the kingdom of night I witnessed a strange trial. Three rabbis, all erudite and pious men, decided one winter evening to indict God for having allowed his children to be massacred. An awesome conclave, particularly in view of the fact that it was held in a concentration camp. But what happened next is to me even more awesome still. After the trial at which God had been found guilty as charged, one of the rabbis looked at the watch which he had somehow managed to preserve in the kingdom of night and said, "Ah, it is time for prayers." And with that the three rabbis, all erudite and pious men, all bowed their heads and prayed.¹

Perhaps the words of the persecuted Jesus may be viewed in the same way. The God who has been found guilty of absence remains a God to be approached through prayer. The God who is absent is still “*My God, my God.*” Sometimes the closest we can come to a statement of faith is in moments of agony.

These interpretations of Jesus’ words of agony can be appropriate, even helpful. They are helpful if they set a context in which we can better understand Jesus’ words. They are not helpful, however, if we let such interpretations take the stinging edge off Jesus’ words, which somehow manage to stand as powerful as ever anyway, beyond our ability to mute or diminish them. Besides, as difficult as it may be to let these words stand as stark and threatening as they sound, it is only when we do so that we can receive their true blessing.

So let us assume that Jesus actually felt forsaken, that what we read and hear from Jesus is true despair, a true sense of being forsaken. The hour was dark, we are told, and in more ways than one. It was dark with the kind of eerie darkness that can fall like a pall over the world in midday. And it is a dark time for Jesus, what has been called the dark night of the soul, which can lengthen ominous shadows any day at any time. Although death is the greatest isolator of all, it is clear that Jesus is not here expressing the fear of death. Rather, as he faces death, what prompts his cry is the sense of being forsaken by all who loved him, even forsaken by God.

“Misery loves company,” or so the old adage has it. But abject misery is isolating as nothing else this side of death has the power to be. Abject misery does not seek company; it knows no company. A cry of misery can have no accompaniment. Into the most important areas of life, we go single file. We are born single file. We die single file. We enter life’s darkest days single file, face our greatest disappointments single file, without companions, and necessarily so. Where we go in those moments, no one else can follow. And those are lonely moments, with a kind of loneliness that cannot be quenched because there is no companion anywhere to be found who can share them.

But, certainly, God is the exception. We are never forsaken by God. God can accompany us into the dark times, the despairing, dark times. And yet, even if God is not absent, God may be perceived as absent, which is just as agonizing. “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” It is the question of those who wonder how it is that circumstances seem to conspire against them and who begin to conclude that God is in on the conspiracy. It is the question of the patient clutching the sheets of the hospital bed, the question of the prisoner in Auschwitz who watches a grim parade of family and friends being led to their deaths, the question of any who, out of their misery, cry with the poet Coleridge, “*Alone, alone, all, all alone, alone on a wide, wide sea.*” And it is Jesus’ question.

No one feels so alone as the one who feels deserted by God. And note the cruel irony that the absence of God is only a problem for the believer. It is only the believer who even experiences the absence of God. Furthermore, the greater one’s faith, the greater the potential for disillusionment when that faith is directed toward a God who seems to have left without a trace. It is the one who rejoices most in God’s presence who is the most bereft when God is gone. By this measure, could anyone have felt so deserted, so alone, all, all alone, as Jesus on the cross?

“*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” It is difficult to let that question stand, raw and not explained away; yet there are gracious benefits in doing just that.

A Jesus who would experience the full range of human circumstances and human emotions must surely experience the sense of being forsaken. He came to live among us not as God in a human costume that can be shed whenever things begin to get hard and rough. Rather, in Jesus, God came as human to the bone, which means human enough to experience human doubts, bone-deep despair, and even the perceived absence of God. If Jesus never experiences these things, that would mean that he never experiences the kind of human life that we live, which is filled with such things.

The Apostle's Creed contains this affirmation about Jesus: "Jesus Christ was crucified, dead and buried. He descended to hell." The last part of that statement always used to trouble me until one day someone told me that, for her, it is the most treasured part of the creed. When I asked why, she answered, "Because hell is where I spend much of my life." Hell—the dark night of the soul, a sense of being forsaken, the absence of God, a place of despair. We have been there. And Jesus has been there. He has been with us. And having been there, Jesus transforms it. He transforms the experience of any and all who have been in hell, transforms it by his presence which cannot help but transform even the darkest regions.

One who would rescue those trapped in a mine shaft sometimes must enter into the danger and darkness of that place himself. How else can those who are trapped be saved if the one who knows the way out is not willing to be trapped with them?

Before a savior can share his light with us, he must first enter into our darkness, including the darkness of agony and despair. The story of Jesus despairing on the cross is the story of a God willing to experience our hopelessness that we might have hope and the story of a God willing to share in human defeat, that we might, in turn, share God's victory.

For that reason, this despairing question we find difficult to hear may end up being the most important and ultimately, the most hopeful question Jesus ever asked.

Note

1 Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 154.