

Forsaken, Or Felt Forsaken?



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My last post on the cross focused on two questions: 1) Did God kill Jesus on the cross, and 2) was Jesus damned by God on the cross? This post seeks to answer another question: Was Jesus truly, objectively forsaken by God on the cross, or did He merely *feel* forsaken?

Nick Batzig opens an excellent post with these sad, but true words:

18 years ago, I heard a sermon on Matthew 27:46 – Jesus’ cry of dereliction on the cross, “My God, My God, Why have You forsaken Me?” At one point, the minister who was preaching this message said, “Jesus wasn’t really forsaken; he just felt forsaken by his Father in his soul.” I remember sensing anger welling up within me at those words. I thought to myself, “That’s a denial of the Gospel. If Jesus wasn’t really forsaken, then I have no grounds to believe that I will never be forsaken.”

This statement should not be taken as true just because it is stated. I do not find in any of the apostolic announcement of the gospel the centrality of Jesus being forsaken by God. I’m not sure why we should assume that this is a central factor of our Gospel? That seems like a conclusion someone has reached synthesizing other truths.

It is also unclear why Jesus not being forsaken by the Father in any way removes our assurance that we will never be forsaken. That promise was made to Israel and to Joshua long before the cross of Christ. The writer of Hebrews passed on this promise (13:5), but not in connection to the suffering of Christ in being forsaken by God.

Sadly, I have subsequently come to discover that there are quite a number of Protestant theologians who have shied away from asserting that Jesus was really and truly forsaken by his Father when he hung on the cross.

I have the same reaction as Batzig – anger – when I hear or read pastors and theologians wrongly assert that Jesus was not really and truly forsaken by God on the cross. If Jesus merely felt forsaken on the cross, then I can merely feel forgiven. If Jesus only felt forsaken by God, then I can only feel regenerated, I can only feel justified, and I can only feel adopted by God. Mere feelings don't cut it when it comes to eternal redemption from hell and everlasting glory and joy in heaven. Feelings don't really matter. Real, objective punishment for my sins matters. It is true that Jesus felt forsaken on the cross. But He felt forsaken because He was forsaken. As a sinner, that is my only hope to be saved. To assert that Jesus only felt forsaken on the cross is a grave error that strikes at the heart of the Gospel. **And it's a serious sin to ever diminish the sufferings of Christ in any way.**

Agreed. However, the question is what the nature of his suffering was. It is not a serious sin to conclude that he didn't suffer in a way that others said he did. To diminish the sufferings of Christ, we must know what his actual sufferings were according to the apostolic witness. This statement basically assumes that to disagree with a person's viewpoint about Jesus' suffering is sin, and that's a step too far.

What Jesus Said

On the cross and in unimaginable agony as He endured the anger, curse, and judgment of God, Jesus cried out the words of [Psalm 22:1](#): "My God, My God, Why have You forsaken Me?" Jesus did not cry out "My God, My God, Why do I feel forsaken by You?" Jesus said what He meant, and He meant what He said. He knew He was forsaken by God, and He knew that in Gethsemane He would be forsaken by God.

The author seems to miss a third option. Of course Jesus meant what He said, but what did He mean by what He said? Quoting Psalm 22 would have been no accident as He hung there. Even as people mocked Him and assumed God had forsaken Him, He was calling them to consider the prophetic expectation of His suffering described so clearly in this Psalm. But the first line of the Psalm is based on the misunderstanding of the psalmist. As you read through his process of inner struggle to understand his suffering, he finally concludes that he was wrong to think he was forsaken. "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" (Psalm 22:24). I've no problem agreeing that Jesus didn't feel forsaken, but I don't agree that the only other option is that he WAS forsaken. He was drawing attention to the Scriptures about His suffering that they should have known.

This is one reason He cried out three times with sweat like great drops of blood ([Luke 22:44](#)) for His Father to please take the cup of the cross away from Him.

Explaining Jesus' cry from the cross, D. A. Carson rightly comments:

"It is better to take the words at face value: Jesus is conscious of being abandoned by his Father. For one who knew the intimacy of [Matthew 11:27](#), such abandonment must have been agony; and for the same reason, it is inadequate to hypothesize that Jesus felt abandoned but was not truly abandoned... because 'it seems difficult to understand how Jesus, who had lived in the closest possible fellowship with the Father, could have been unaware whether he had, in fact, been abandoned'" (*Matthew, The Expositors Bible Commentary, Matthew 27:46*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010, 647).

Again, taking Jesus' words at face value doesn't get you to this conclusion. Are we to conclude that Jesus knew that He was, in fact, forsaken, but didn't know why? He cried out a question, not a declaration. The comments made to exclude the possibility of Jesus' mistaken feelings also suggest that He was confused as to why He was truly forsaken. Of course neither is true. He wasn't mistaken on either issue. He was calling out to those onlookers who should have understood His suffering in light of Psalm 22. Those mockers were actually fulfilling the psalmist's prediction of the Messiah's suffering!

Arguing that Jesus merely felt forsaken is almost tantamount to calling the Lord of glory a liar.

Jesus asked God why He had forsaken Him – this means He was forsaken. Charles Spurgeon preached this truth well, and we should listen:

I have known believers, in sore trouble, make great blunders concerning what God was doing with them. They have thought that He had forsaken them, for they misinterpreted certain signs, and dealings of God, and they said, "All these things are against us; the hand of God has gone out against us to destroy us." But Christ made no mistake about this matter, for God had forsaken Him. It was really so. When He said, "Why have You forsaken Me?" He spoke infallible truth, and His mind was under no cloud whatsoever. He knew what He was saying, and He was right in what He said, for His Father had forsaken Him for the time . . . After all, beloved, the only solution of the mystery is this; Jesus Christ was forsaken of God because we deserved to be forsaken of God. He was there, on the cross, in our room, and place, and stead; and as the sinner, by reason of his sin, deserves not to enjoy the favor of God, so Jesus Christ, standing in the place of the sinner, and enduring that which would vindicate the justice of God, had to come under the cloud, as the sinner must have come, if Christ had not taken his place. But, then, since He has come under it, let us recollect that He was thus left of God that you and I, who believe in Him, might never be left of God. Since He, for a little while, was separated from His Father, we may boldly cry, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" and, with the apostle Paul, we may confidently affirm that nothing in the whole universe "shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." . . . A Puritan preacher was standing by the deathbed of one of his members who had been for thirty years in gloom of soul. The good old minister expected that the man would get peace at last, for he had been an eminent Christian, and had greatly rejoiced in his Savior; but, for thirty years or more, he had fallen into deep gloom. The minister was trying to speak a word of comfort to him, but the man said, "Ah, sir! But what can you say to a man who is dying, and yet who feels that God has forsaken him?" The pastor replied, "But what became of that Man who died, whom God really did forsake? Where is HE now?" The dying man caught at that, and said, "He is in glory, and I shall be with Him; I shall be with Him where He is." And so the light came to the dying man who had been so long in the dark; He saw that Christ had been just where he was, and that he should be where Christ was, even at the right hand of the Father ("The Saddest Cry From The Cross").

I notice the case is being made thus far by quoting other preachers/theologians rather than appealing to the Scriptures themselves.

Forsakenness In The Old Testament

We ought to look to the Old Testament concept of forsakenness to rightly understand what Jesus meant when He said that He was forsaken by God on the cross:

1. God hides His face from the one He forsakes.

To be forsaken by God means God will hide His face from the forsaken one. Right before Moses died, God warned Moses that Israel would forsake Him and serve other gods. As a result of this rebellion, God told Moses that He would forsake His people and hide His face from them: “. . . my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them . . .” (Deuteronomy 31:17).

The Psalmist also connects the hiding of God’s face with being forsaken: “Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger, O you who have been my help. Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation!” (Psalm 27:9).

This is exactly how faithful preachers of the past, like Spurgeon and Martyn Lloyd-Jones, have preached about what Christ endured for sinners on the cross. Spurgeon preached:

Christ in that hour took all our sins, past, present, and to come, and was punished for them all there and then, that we might never be punished, because he suffered in our stead. Do you see, then, how it was that God the Father bruised him? Unless he had so done the agonies of Christ could not have been an equivalent for our sufferings; for hell consists in the hiding of God's face from sinners, and if God had not hidden his face from Christ, Christ could not – I see not how he could – have endured any suffering that could have been accepted as an equivalent for the woes and agonies of his people (*The Death Of Christ*)

Lloyd-Jones also preached this way:

[God] has made His Son the sacrifice; it is a substitutionary offering for your sins and mine. That was why He was there in the Garden sweating drops of blood, because He knew what it involved – it involved a separation from the face of the father. And that is why He cried out on the Cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Commentary on Romans 8:32).

Everyone else had forsaken Him, His disciples had fled and had left Him, but now He cries, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” The one who utters that cry is “the beloved,” the one who had basked in the sunshine of the eternal love from eternity, without intermission. He reaches a point wherein even He has lost sight of the face and the smile of His Father. And He experienced that for you, for me. ("In The Beloved")

Once again, these are all conclusions being reached, not the clear testimony of the apostolic witness. This is a great concern to me, for the author is claiming some pretty severe things about those who disagree with his position. Yet there are only statements of conclusions reached regarding the Father’s forsaking of the Son. It nowhere states that the Father turned His face away from the Son. We are forcing that connection.

2. God turns the one He forsakes over to his enemies.

To be forsaken by God means God will turn the forsaken one over to his enemies, often to kill and destroy him. God repeatedly did this to His people to judge them because of their sin: “I have forsaken my house; I have abandoned my heritage; I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies. My heritage has become to me like a lion in the forest; she has lifted up her voice against me; therefore I hate her” (Jeremiah 12:7-8).

“And I will forsake the remnant of my heritage and give them into the hand of their enemies, and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies . . .” (2 Kings 21:14).

This actually happened to Jesus on the cross. He didn't merely feel like He had been turned over to His enemies: Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, the Jews, the Roman soldiers, etc. He was literally, fully, objectively turned over to them, and they killed Him. And this was all orchestrated by God's sovereign hand (Acts 4:27-28). Though this was not the primary sense in which Jesus was forsaken on the cross, it was certainly a part of His utter forsakenness in that God did not deliver Him from His enemies. Thomas Goodwin wrote that, though it's true that men were Christ's executioners, only God could punish His soul:

See the love of God, who gave not his Son up only to the hands of men to be executioners of his body, but himself laid on upon his soul; and that because justice called for the soul, the very soul, ere it would be satisfied. Which no creature being able to reach, rather than we should not be redeemed, he will be the executioner himself; ties him to the cross, and with his own hand whips him, because no creature could strike strokes hard enough (Christ The Mediator, 286).

Jesus willingly faced the unjust treatment He faced at the hands of His enemies. According to the apostle Peter, He did this to set an example for us of how to endure suffering for doing what is right. Jesus wasn't turned over to His enemies because God was against Him, as in the description above. He was modeling for His people what righteousness must endure in this wicked world in order to advance the saving kingdom work of God. (see 1 Peter 2:18-25)

3. God is angry with the one He forsakes.

God's anger burns toward the one He forsakes. In Lamentations, God's anger is clearly included in what it means to be forsaken by God: “Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days? Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old – unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us” (Lamentations 5:20-22). Though God always loved His Son, even while He suffered on the cross, God was angry with Him because of our sins and forsook Him because He Who knew no sin was made sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). This does not mean that the ontological Trinity was broken apart (none of what I'm arguing implies this), nor does this mean that God stopped loving His Son while He was on the cross.

Thomas Goodwin has masterfully written on this point, over and over again:

And also this offering up himself was so sweet a smelling sacrifice to God (as Eph. V. 2), that although God expressed never so much anger against Christ as when he hung upon the cross, yet he was never so well pleased by him as then... (Christ The Mediator, 136)

Why, say they, can God love his Son and be angry with him at the same time? And he that is God blessed for ever, can he be made a curse in his soul? Yes, take him as a surety. They take part with one truth of the gospel to exclude the other, whereas the gospel is a reconciliation of both these, and therein lies the depth of it (The Glory Of The Gospel, 32).

At the risk of being repetitious, the apostolic witness never declares that God was angry at His Son. This is the conclusion of Bible teachers that made sense to them. This isn't the

faith “once for all entrusted to the saints”, but the author would have me believe that it is because of well-respected teachers’ declarations.

The Old Testament is clear that when God forsakes, He hides His face from the one He forsakes, turns him over to his enemies, and burns in anger toward him. All of this happened to Jesus while He suffered for sinners on the cross. It was a real, objective forsakenness. And the salvation He won for us is a real, objective salvation.

Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Some points that persuaded me to change my mind about this view, which I was taught growing up:

- 1. As I said several times above, the apostolic witness never claims Jesus was forsaken by the Father (which fundamentally means “left” in the Hebrew). That the Father left Jesus is never stated, so why must we state it so emphatically as a part of our Gospel?*
- 2. As I said above, Jesus asked a question. If He was sincerely asking, then He didn’t understand what He was doing as well as we thought He did. Why would He beg for the cup to be passed because of the forsaking, if He wasn’t sure why He was being forsaken? Clearly He was quoting Psalm 22:1 for another reason.*
- 3. Reading through the flow of Psalm 22 makes it clear that the psalmist was not forsaken by YHWH, though he felt he was. But the point for us in considering Jesus’ quote from the cross was that the psalm is remarkably prophetic about the details of our Messiah’s suffering – even the mockery of the crowds that heard Him speak the words.*
- 4. If the Father forsook Jesus and turned away from Him, for how long? Wouldn’t it have been until He died? If so, why did Jesus call out to the Father to forgive His persecutors? Why did He commit His spirit to the Father only to have the Father take His spirit so that He died relatively early in the crucifixion process? The Father was there, listening and responding to His Son. He was merciful to Him, letting His suffering end as soon as the work was done.*