

Why have you forsaken me? Matthew 27:46

Do you feel your mortality, live conscious that your own life will end in death?

Death – so awful, alien to the life we live, the life we cherish

And yet so unremarkable, for we all die. It's the experience we all have in common.

As Ecclesiastes observes Death is the destiny of everyone. [Eccles. 7:2]

No one's death is, in the final analysis, a surprise, or particularly special.

Yet here we are gathering to remember a death, the death of Jesus almost two thousand years ago.

And it wasn't a death that was in the eyes of people at the time particularly gallant or noble. In fact the opposite.

It was a shameful death, the death of rebels and criminals on a cross, a death designed to demonstrate their powerlessness and humiliation before an all powerful Rome, a death better forgotten

Just as we might seek to blot out the last months and days of a beloved parent or spouse whose body has decayed before our eyes with terminal dementia or cancer, blot out that memory to be able to remember the person that was before their end, their warmth and love, their cheerful conversation and interest.

But Christians don't blot out the death of Jesus. It stays front and centre in our memory of Him.

Why?

Why remember this cruel and shameful death?

Part of the answer is found in the words Matthew and Mark record Jesus as crying from the cross on which he hangs, His life ebbing away

"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

This is the beginning of Psalm 22,

Psalm 22:¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

*Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?*

words which express for Jesus both His consciousness of who He is, and His understanding of what He is experiencing on the cross

Psalm 22 is a Psalm of David, Israel's greatest King or anointed one. The Psalm speaks of the experience of the anointed one, or Christ, both in His oppression by His enemies and His deliverance by His God.

Even on the cross Jesus does not back down from His claim to be the Christ, the Son of God [16:16, 26:63-64]. His cry says the words of this Psalm are words that are His to use, for they are the words of the Christ, of God's King.

Nor does He, even in His pain, waver in His trust in God – My God, He cries. The God whom He has trusted from His birth is still His God [Ps. 22:9-10]

Yet His faithfulness makes His experience even more puzzling, even less right.

He says He is God-forsaken.

This is a statement with which His enemies, those mocking Him as He dies, would certainly agree.

The Christ, the Son of God in Psalm 2, is a conqueror – but Jesus has been conquered by His enemies

The Christ is a deliverer of the godly, one who saves, - but He cannot save Himself

The Christ is blessed by God – but He is cursed, for the Jewish law says everyone who hangs on a tree is cursed [Gal. 3:13, Deut 21:23]

The Christ is One whom God will deliver and exalt, as even Psalm 22 suggests – but Jesus is left hanging there

What can explain for them His humiliation? Only that He has been abandoned by God, left to, given up to, the consequences of His blasphemous claim to be the Christ, the Son of God.

But Jesus' cry is not just a commentary on His external circumstances.

It is more.

It is an expression of His felt reality, an expression of His consciousness of God His Father's absence, absence in His need

That HE has been abandoned – for there is no rescue, as there was for Isaac on the mountain [Gen. 22:1-19] of Moriah

There is no deliverance from death as there was for David repeatedly.

He is dying, the faithful Christ, God forsaken.

There is a horror here.

Jesus from birth has been the Son of God [Matt. 1:20-23], and throughout His life has been faithful to His Father

The Father at His baptism and on the mountain has declared

"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" [3:17, 17:5]

And Jesus has said that it is the Father alone who knows, truly knows, the Son, just as the Son knows the Father [11:27]

From His birth Jesus has known Himself to be Known and loved by the Father

More, Jesus is the incarnate Son, known and loved by the Father from eternity [John 17:24] with a love of infinite depth and faithfulness, that has shared all things

The one who in John's words is at the Father's side [1:18], is with God always

The Son who loves the Father and sent into the world does what He commands, who even on this cross is fulfilling the Father's will

Not my will be done but yours He had prayed in the garden as He contemplated this death

But on that cross, in that darkness, He knows He is now God-forsaken

Abandoned to a death that a faithful, obedient Son, should never face

Abandoned by one whose love He has always, from before time, known

Why, He cries

My God, Why have you forsaken me?

We cannot guess an answer. Only Jesus is a fit witness to His relationship with the Father.

We can only find the answer in what Jesus has already taught of the purpose of His coming, the purpose of His death,

When His disciples were arguing about greatness the Lord Jesus had said

Matthew 20: ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

HE had said His death would be the price paid to set people free from imprisonment by sin and death

Matthew 26: ²⁸ This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

And less than twenty four hours before He had taught that His death, His blood poured out, would bring forgiveness of sins for many, and include them in the new covenant.

And both these statements of the purpose, the goal of His death, take us back to the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus has said He must fulfil, in particular to Isaiah 53.

Both the ransom and the forgiveness our Lord said are 'for many', and 'many' is how those who would benefit from the work of God's servant in Isaiah 53 are described. The servant is said v. 12 to bear the sin of many

*Isaiah 53: ¹² Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.*

The Lord Jesus knew He is God's promised servant, and that on the cross, doing God's will, He is dying 'for many'. And it is in Isaiah's words that we see why Jesus to achieve the goal of His death, our forgiveness and freedom, experienced God-forsakenness on the cross.

Let me read Isaiah 53

*Isaiah 53: Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
² He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
³ He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.*

*⁴ Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.*

*⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

*⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;*

*he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

⁸ *By oppression and judgment he was taken away.*

*Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.*

⁹ *He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.*

¹⁰ *Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.*

¹¹ *After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.*

¹² *Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.*

Jesus on the cross is bearing our sin, He is enduring the punishment our sins deserve v. 5, 9, His life an offering for sin v. 10

And that is why, hanging there, He is God forsaken.

Why do I say that?

Think for a minute of sin, our sin, and what it deserves

Let's think of the first sin, for in its isolation, before the compounding effect of our many sins, we can see things clearly – its character and consequences

That first sin was ungrateful disobedience that sprang from disbelief, the rebellion of the creature who thought they knew better against their Creator's rule by His Word

God had said don't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat of it you will surely die.

But Adam and Eve believed the lie that God was a liar who would not do what He had said – 'You will not die' the serpent said - and so they ate, not out of need – for they could eat from all the other trees in the garden, but out of desire to be like God, to rule their own lives by their own wisdom.

Eve had measured her action by her own judgement of what would enhance her life – that the fruit was good for food, a delight to the eyes, desirable to make one wise – everything she needed for a satisfying life – not the word of the God who had made her, and provided for all her needs. She decided she was a better judge of what was good for her, and for Adam, than God.

And that is all our sin

Ungrateful disobedience that springs from a desire, a love, for something other than God

That doesn't believe God will keep His word – for He has said the wages of sin is death

And a determination to reckon ourselves better judges of what is right for us than the God who made us

God has said don't lie – but we think lying will serve our purposes better than faithfulness to God

God has said don't hate others – but that is the feeling we enjoy and nurture in our hearts, and tell ourselves it is right

We pursue sexual satisfaction outside marriage of a man and a woman for we tell ourselves we are better judges of what is good for us than God

We set our desire on created things – fame, money, power – and not on loving God

All our sin is ungrateful disobedience that has its roots in disbelief of God's word, and a conviction that we rule our lives better than God

Though God is the almighty, all wise Creator – and we are frail and finite creatures

And it has consequences

Eating the fruit seemed such a small thing. Who was hurt by it?

Yet it brought shame that made Adam and Eve want to hide from God

And then a separation from God's presence and the fulness of His good provision – driven from the garden

A separation we cannot reverse, for rebels, those who always want to substitute their rule for His, cannot be at peace with Him, will always be at war with Him, will always feel His holy wrath and so cannot live in His presence

And then God's judgement of death, dust you are and to dust you will return.

the separation made permanent.

For death is a state which is alien to God who has life in Himself, can have no place in His presence

TO bear the sins of many, to receive in our place the punishment our sins deserve – separation and death – is to be God forsaken

This is what Jesus is enduring on the cross

and we can barely imagine that reality

The disruption of eternal love

An eternal and Infinite love

The significance of the death of Jesus is not measured in time, in days

It is measured by the relationship it disrupts, by the God forsakenness of the Son of God.

Jesus is God forsaken to achieve the purpose of His death, our freedom and forgiveness, by suffering in our place what our sin deserves.

But that does not fully answer the Why, why have you forsaken me. The question why someone is doing something can be answered, yes, by talking about what they want to achieve; but it can also be answered by talking about their motive, what has prompted them to want to achieve that goal.

If you ask why I am giving the cashier ten dollars, I could answer – to buy chocolate. But I could also answer by referring to what is driving me to buy chocolate – because I am hungry. Both would be true.

Jesus suffers and dies on that cross, endures this God forsakenness, not because He deserves it, as His enemies and mockers claimed

He does this because it is the Father's will

We saw that in the garden

Not my will, but yours be done – He prayed to the Father

We see it in the description of the Servant's work

*the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

¹⁰ *Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin,*

This death, this God forsakenness, is the Father's will.

Why?

It is God's purpose to save sinners, the many – because He is merciful and compassionate

As John's gospel says it is because God loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to give life to all who believe in Him. John 3:16

God, who is rich in mercy, writes Paul, out of the great love with which He loved us, when we were dead in our trespasses and sins made we who believe alive with Christ Eph. 2:4

God loves those who deserve His wrath, the unlovely, the foolishly proud creatures who have disbelieved and disobeyed,

And In the end there is no answer to that terrible why beyond love, and no cause for the love outside God Himself

The love of God for the world, that would bear the cost of saving, and saving completely by the offering of His Son on the cross, a sacrifice sufficient to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world [1 John 2:2], that wills to bear the cost in Himself, in the relationship of the Father and the Son.

And because of that gracious love of God this is a death that changes everything – changes the way we see our world, changes our thinking about God, changes our present and our future.

Changes everything for those who believe the gospel that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, was buried and on the third day was raised to life

this death Changes the way we see our world

It is revealed as the world the good God rules, not human greed and pride and folly.

A world where what seems so dark, so unbearably sad, such as the mocking and crushing of one who lived in truth and love is, can become in God's hands the source of light and joy

A world where God's determination to bless in the overflow of His love will triumph, and lies and hate and death, the lies and hate and death we see in the violence of our world, that threatens again and again the destruction of all, will not have the last word

A world we know will one day be set free from decay and futility.

And this death changes our thinking about God.

His rule is no longer a threat to our full humanity, but the order in which it flourishes, to be welcomes, not resented
His apparent silence, for Christ's cry receives no answer, is not an absence or abandonment, but the prospering of His purposes of love

His order restoring justice which we can fear is now known to be always accompanied with mercy for the repentant, for He longs to save

In Christ's death God is known as the God we can draw near to, not the God we should flee from

And this death changes believers' present and future, our life and death

Jesus is God Forsaken, so we, forgiven, would never be, would always be able to say with Paul

Romans 8: ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

He is Humiliated, so we could be exalted as God's Sons and Daughters, no matter what shame we bear in this life

He is Dying so we would live, dying so that when our death comes, as it will, we can say to depart and be with Christ is better by far, and we will be, not separated as He was on the Cross, but with the Lord forever

In a world of death, where no-one's death should surprise us, this is a death worth remembering always – with great thankfulness and praise for the one who died and the Father who sent Him to the cross, praise for their love and faithfulness, might and wisdom, praise for the only God, Father, Son and Spirit, in whom alone is salvation for all

The death that, always remembered is the basis for trusting our God in our own suffering and in our struggle to live lives of love and truth as followers of the crucified Saviour in a world that still practices lies and hate

And the foundation of confident hope, that having given His Son for us our Father will certainly give us all things He has promised us, and we will never be separated from His love

Thanks and praise For when we hear our Lord's cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" we, taught by our God, can answer with grateful love – Lord, it was for us, and for love.