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Jesus Was Not Forsaken on the Cross

As Jesus died on the cross he cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34) It is a direct quote of the first line of Psalm 22. This is sometimes interpreted to mean that God the Father abandoned the Son at that moment, because the sins of the world were now upon Jesus and a holy God could not be in the presence of sin.

We can begin with the idea that God cannot be in the presence of sin. If this idea is true, then we are in deep trouble. We cannot get rid of our sinful nature on our own - God must do it. So if God cannot be in the presence of sin, then we are lost forever because God cannot come into the presence of our fatal problem.

The good news is that Jesus is God, he is fully God, and he is God in sinful, human flesh dealing with our sin problem (2 Cor. 5:21). If we believe that God cannot be in the presence of sin then we have to also conclude that either: a). Jesus is not fully God or b). Jesus did not come into the presence of our sin and deal with it.

Since we know that Jesus is fully God and that he did come into the presence of our sin and deal with it then we can also know that God can be in the presence of sin. And you can bet that what's true of Jesus is true of the Father as well because if you have seen Jesus you have seen the Father (John 14:9).

Believing that the Father abandoned the Son creates another problem: an inaccurate view of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Though they are distinct persons within the Trinity, the Father and Son are never separated from one another in substance. Though they each have their unique characteristics (for example, the Son is begotten of the Father, but the Father is un-begotten) they are both, together with the Holy Spirit, the *one* true God of Israel.

Jesus says “I am in the Father and he is in me” (John 14:11.) If the Son carries the sins of the world, then God carries the sins of the world. Jesus is not someone or something separate from God. He is fully God in the flesh, from conception to death to ascension. To suggest that the Father can cut himself off from the Son, creating a split in the Trinity, is to suggest that there are two gods or that Jesus is somehow less than God.

The fact that the Father had not abandoned his Son is demonstrated by several points. First of all, Jesus was resurrected three days later. The Psalmist says “you will not abandon me to the grave nor let your Holy One see decay” (Psalm 16:10.) In his Pentecost sermon, the first preaching of the gospel, Peter quotes this verse to demonstrate to his audience that while Jesus appeared to have been abandoned on the cross, the resurrection demonstrated that he *had not* been forsaken and he is, therefore, the Savior (Acts 2:23-36.)

Furthermore, we need only to read the rest of the words in Psalm 22 to see this reality (You might want to do that right now, before finishing this article). Psalm 22 presents the picture of a person who feels abandoned by God, but is not. As David works through his emotions he comes to

a point of great faith and triumph: the realization that although he feels abandoned, God is with him and God will raise him up. Notice especially verse 24, “. . . he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he *has not bidden his face* from him . . .” (Emphasis mine).

What, then, does Jesus mean when he cries out in anguish? The key to understanding Jesus’ feelings at that moment is to look at his humanity. It is Jesus in his normal, flesh and blood humanity who is crying out. Jesus *feels forsaken, even though he is not*. Jesus feels abandoned, even though his Father is right there with him.

Why? Because that is how it feels when you are a human being and you are betrayed, deserted by your friends, and dying in agony. When we are in such painful moments it feels like God has abandoned us. That’s how David felt in Psalm 22, and that is how Jesus - a real human being - felt.

Someone might ask, “if Jesus is fully God, and God knows everything, wouldn’t he know that he was not really abandoned?” The key here is understanding what the incarnation is. When the eternally begotten Son becomes flesh and blood he is limiting himself to a flesh and blood existence.

For example, God the Son is everywhere, but as the incarnate Jesus he had to be in one place at one time - and he had to travel to get from place to place. The Word of God knows everything, but in the person of Jesus he had to learn and grow up like any other person. The Son comprehends all things instantly, but as he lived as the man Jesus, the Son was led by the Spirit and said only what the Father revealed to him. No wonder the ancient hymn of the church says “he made himself nothing and humbled himself on the cross” (Philippians 2:6-11.)

As he dies on the cross, Jesus knows that he is doing the Father’s will but he does not understand every detail of what is happening to him. And like any human being who doesn’t know everything he feels the confusion of suffering senseless agony and yet still believing that God is good and loves him.

Recognizing the humanity of Jesus does not mean that we are dividing his humanity from his divinity. He is not human one moment and divine the next. He is always fully God and fully man from conception to death to ascension. The issue is this: Jesus does not exercise the prerogatives of his divinity. Being made flesh and blood means that he lives a normal human life, tempted in all ways just as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15.) Even the miracles he performed were not because of his fully divine nature but because he was filled with the Holy Spirit and doing his Father’s will.

So why would all this matter to us? Because our lives will involve suffering. We will experience betrayal, abandonment, and pain. We will die. In those times of suffering and difficulty we will be tempted to think thoughts like these:

God has turned his back on me.

God is punishing me for my sins.

God would help me if I were a better Christian.

God will deliver me when I “learn my lesson” and get my life right with him.

Do you notice one thing that all these sentiments have in common? None of them begins with

“My Daddy in heaven . . .” They all begin with the great omni-being in the sky, the G-O-D (as Baxter Kruger describes that view of God).

We will cry out “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” to the extent we believe that Jesus was truly abandoned by the G-O-D in the sky. Then we may lose faith in our Father’s love and believe that he may abandon us too.

But to the extent that we know that Jesus’ Daddy in heaven never left him or abandoned him we can also know that our Daddy feels the same way about us.

If we know and believe that the righteous are *never* forsaken (Psalm 37:25), and that we are righteous because of what Jesus has done, then we have the faith to believe that our Daddy will never abandon us. If we know and believe that even with all the sinfulness of human nature upon him, the Son was never forsaken by his loving Father, then we know that our Father will never abandon us no matter how much we sin. If we know and believe that our Daddy rescued Jesus through the resurrection then we know that he has rescued us as well.

The doubt and darkness that Jesus experienced was the reality of how it feels to suffer in our humanity, but it was not the reality of how the Father views us and relates to us. Jesus felt forsaken, as we all do at times, but in reality his Daddy was really with him. Jesus’ life reveals this reality: that even when we feel forsaken, God is with us and God is for us.

~ Jonathan Stepp