
Biblical Studies / Classic

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Why hast thou forsaken me?

"And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"

(Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46)

Summary: The final statement – an argument for the humanity of Christ – an unanswered question – no deliverance – Hebrew or Aramaic – based on Psalm 22 – explained by the author of Hebrews – His sufferings made him fully qualified to save us.

This is the most challenging of all the difficult sayings. It is the final clear declaration of the crucified Jesus recorded by Mark and Matthew. Shortly afterwards, with a loud cry (and we are not told what he said), he drew his last breath.

P. W. Schmiedel regarded this utterance as one of the few "absolutely credible" texts that could serve as "foundation-pillars for a truly scientific life of Jesus," on the premise that it was unlikely to be a product of the worship of Jesus within the Church.

No one would have invented this saying; it was an uncompromising fact of tradition that an evangelist had to either reproduce it as it was or pass over without mention.

It would be wise not to base the reconstruction of Jesus' inner feelings on this saying from the cross.

The question "Why?" was asked, but it remained unanswered. Nevertheless, some theologians and psychologists have sought to provide an answer that the record does not offer. We should not follow their example.

This at least must be said: if it is a difficult saying for the reader of the Gospels, it was the hardest of all for our Lord himself. The assurances on which men and women of God in Old Testament times relied in faith were not for Jesus. The psalmist said, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all" (Psalm 34:19). But no deliverance appeared for Jesus.

It appears that the words are quoted from the beginning of Psalm 22. The words are not taken from the Hebrew text but from an Aramaic paraphrase. We see the Aramaic form Eloi, "my God," in Mark, whereas the Hebrew form Eli appears in Matthew. Any attempt to determine the exact pronunciation must consider that some bystanders thought Jesus was calling for Elijah to come and help him.

Psalm 22, although it begins with a cry of utter desolation, is ultimately an expression of faith and thanksgiving; the help from God, long hoped for and even despaired of, arrives at last. It has sometimes been argued that, while Jesus is recorded as uttering only the initial cry of desolation, he actually recited the entire psalm (albeit inaudibly) as an expression of faith.

This cannot be proven, but there is one New Testament writer who appears to have believed so - the author of the letter to the Hebrews. This writer, on more than one occasion, quotes other passages from Psalm 22, apart from the opening cry, and attributes them to Jesus.

"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him ..." (Hebrews 5:7-9).

In these words, the writer to the Hebrews explains, through the sufferings Jesus endured, the recognition of Psalm 22:24, that God *“has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him.”*

But when he states that Jesus's prayer “to him who was able to save him from death” was answered, he does not mean that Jesus was saved from dying.

Instead, he means that, having died, he was “brought again from the dead” to live on “by the power of an indestructible life” (Hebrews 13:20; 7:16). The same author describes Jesus in his death as a willing and acceptable sacrifice to God. It was not unusual for martyrs in Israel to give their lives to atone for others' sins.

Instead of harbouring bitter resentment against those who mistreated him so abominably, Jesus offered his life to God as an atonement for their sins and for the sins of the world.

Had Jesus not once said that “the Son of Man came... to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45)? But now, he did so more effectively by truly entering into the desolation of that God-forsakenness which is the lot of sinners - by being “made sin for us,” as Paul puts it (2 Corinthians 5:21).

As one writer put it, “In his death, everything was made his, that sin had made ours – everything in sin except its sinfulness.”

Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered, as the writer to the Hebrews states, because through his suffering, he

understood the cost of his complete obedience to his Father.

His acceptance of the cross crowned his obedience, and he was never more pleasing to the Father than in this act of total devotion; yet, that does not diminish the reality of his experience of being God-forsaken. But this reality has made him more effective as the deliverer and supporter of his people. He is no visitor from another world, avoiding too much involvement with this world of ours; he has completely involved himself in the human lot.

There is no depth of neglect and dereliction known to human beings that he has not explored; through this, he has been "made perfect"—that is, fully qualified to be his people's compassionate helper in their greatest need. If they feel like crying out to God,

'Why hast thou forsaken me?' they can reflect that this is what he cried.

When they call out of the depths to God, he who called out of the depths on Good Friday understands how it feels. But there is this difference: he is with them now to strengthen them; no one was there to strengthen him.