

## **Matthew 27:46**

### **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**

One of the hardest parts of this pandemic for almost all of us is to stay apart. Even people who enjoy having that quiet alone time all to themselves are getting antsy. We are made to be with other people. We are designed to be social creatures. Some of us more than others. So when we have to stay away, it feels unnatural. Being apart from the people we enjoy and want to be with causes us to at least feel uncomfortable.

It's not unusual for young children to experience separation anxiety. It is an excessive fear or worry about separation from home or an attachment figure.<sup>1</sup> An infant's life may have a normal dose of separation anxiety as they better understand their relationships and master their environment. Gradually, though, that toddler will understand that even if she can't see mommy, she will be right back. Sometimes we develop a fear of abandonment because of traumatic events in life. They can be so fearful of losing someone they care about that they push people away before they can develop a close attachment.

Of the words Jesus cries out from the cross, the seven words from the cross, this is the one we can relate to the best. If our recent experiences of being locked up inside our home for an uncomfortable amount of time tell us anything, it's that we don't want any more serious separations. We sometimes feel God is very far away from us. We sense a lack of his presence when we feel like we need him the most. We sometimes wonder if God hasn't forsaken me too.

And yet, the reality is, we may fear abandonment from God, but we are the ones who have abandoned him. It may be something simple like when a parent forgets a distracted child in a grocery store aisle. It might be as tragic as walking out on their marriage and family. Consciously and unconsciously we have left a yawning chasm between ourselves and God.

Living attentively in tuned with God's Word takes time and energy. When following God's will gets tough for us, we often abandon God. At times it feels like we are swimming upstream against the moral current of our times. Sexuality is more about self expression in our society. Setting sexual intimacy aside exclusively for marriage sounds old fashioned. Focusing on our own needs cause us to turn people into objects for our own gratification. Showing respect for people in authority comes across as laughably childish. We feel entitled to mock and ridicule parents, supervisors, church leaders, and government officials simply for the crime of disagreeing with our opinions or having alternate views on how to handle any situation.

Other times we unconsciously abandon God's standards simply by failure to regularly use God's Word. It's hard right now to look beyond the urgent and immediate so we can see the opportunities God gives us to reflect his love and compassion to the people in our lives. Even if I've made God's Word a big part of my life I can drift away from making it real in my life because I search out the parts I'm looking for to validate my feelings and reinforce my

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/conditions/separation-anxiety>

beliefs, give me the upper hand in an argument or feel morally superior to someone who doesn't make the same choices I do. Using God's Word becomes a treasure hunt for my personal ego instead of allowing God's Word to confront my inborn sinfulness and default selfishness. I don't let it lay bare how woefully I've failed God so I can see how wide the chasm is between who I am and what God expects me to be, allowing God's Word to convict me and lead me to repent. Using God's Word to show me I am the one who has forsaken God.

When Jesus cries out: **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** it's not because he's confused. (Matthew 27:46) Jesus is not crying out in shock that God would do such a terrible thing to him. No, Jesus is completely emptying himself of what he is, giving up all claims of his own perfect accomplishments, his flawless moral performance completely in sync with God's will. Jesus knows this is the climax, the culmination of his earthly mission. Jesus can handle pain. But the utter agony of feeling the full impact of God's abandonment because of sin causes Jesus to cry out. Jesus is giving himself over to this destiny to spare us from absolute and infinite separation from God.

Because Jesus was forsaken, God never abandons you.

It sounds silly, but we understand God the best when he seems to make the least sense. When Jesus is abandoned on the cross, we see most clearly that God "refuses to let our sin determine our relationship with him." (Hauerwas, p. 65) God's love for his creatures means he can't let us go our own way, whether intentionally out of rebellion against God or by our careless disregard of his revealed Word to us. When Jesus cries out on the cross it means we have certainty in the middle of our confusion. It means definitely, without a doubt that "the Son of God has taken our place, become for us the abandonment our sin produces so that we may live confident that the world has been redeemed by this cross." (Hauerwas, p. 65)

Stephen King is sorry you feel like you're stuck in a Stephen King novel. That is the summary of an interview that aired with the author just the other evening. Stephen King is pretty well known for a particular genre of literature. And quite a few of his books have been turned into movies. His genius appeals to audiences in the way he can take a pretty ordinary situation, say clowns for example, and blow them up to such an extreme that causes anyone to be terrified. Die hard fans would know that in 1978 King wrote a novel called "The Stand" in which a viral epidemic that decimated the world's population.<sup>2</sup> (Terry Gross, Fresh Air 2020 April 08) Now people feel like they are actually in one of those fictitious stories, because reality is so close to what came out of Stephen King's imagination. But in that interview, after apologizing that people feel like they are part of a horror story, he says what most of us are actually feeling is a heaping dose of cabin fever. That, and "a kind of gnawing anxiety where you say to yourself, I shouldn't go out." He admits that his works specialize in the "intrusion of the unexpected and strange" into the lives of ordinary people. Right now, we don't have to live in horror. We can still use fiction as an escape,

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<sup>2</sup> "Stephen King Is Sorry You Feel Like You're Stuck In A Stephen King Novel" Fresh Air © 2020 NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/08/829298135/stephen-king-is-sorry-you-feel-like-youre-stuck-in-a-stephen-king-novel>; accessed 09 April 2020

because even when it's like a very vivid dream, we know we can go back to reality. But when gnawing anxiety is a real part of life, we want an escape from what is actually going on in our lives. Or at least in our minds.

And we can struggle with what our minds tell us about separation from God. Martin Luther experienced serious struggles in his life. So often he tried to do his best to please God and yet still felt like God was angry with him. He never felt like he could do enough to escape from God's wrath and anger. In German it was his *Anfechtung*, his agonizing struggle. He had a breakthrough when reading the Psalms. Psalm 22 is unmistakably connected to what Jesus experienced on the cross. Luther could understand how King David could cry out that he had been forsaken by God. David was guilty of some serious sins recorded in Scripture. But how then could these words be placed into the mouth of Jesus during his crucifixion?

And this is the key Luther understood for understanding why Jesus would cry out that God had forsaken him on the cross and what it means for us. Sometimes we feel abandoned. It seems like God has turned his back on us. We can certainly think that way. But when we feel abandoned, even in the worst case scenario as a child of God, it is small dose of the ultimate forsakenness. In our walking away from God because our distracted self-focus, God allows us to feel the bite, the pain of guilt over our sin. God gives this brief sting to get our attention and call us back. The only person who has been truly innocent yet experienced the full force of being forsaken by God was Jesus. Actual and ultimate torment of hell on the cross. What we suffer in our darkness moments is only a shadow of the reality that swept over Jesus on Good Friday.

Worse than the betrayal and denial by his disciples, more painful than the mockery and ridicule of Israel's religious leaders, more brutal than the crown of thorns scraping into his scalp and the bite of each lash from the whip of Roman soldiers, more damaging than the nails piercing tissue and tendons, was the utter alienation from his Father. The torments of hell are punishment for sinful impurity and sinful weakness and sinful rebellion. But Jesus was guilty of none of these sins. A Luther biographer summarizes this powerful breakthrough that came from connecting Psalm 22 with this cry of Jesus on the cross: "He who was without sin for our sakes became sin and so identified himself with us as to participate in our alienation. He who was truly man so sensed his solidarity with humanity as to feel himself along with mankind estranged from the All Holy." (Bainton, p. 47)

Now comes the great Lutheran question. What does this mean? This means that because Jesus was forsaken, God never abandons you!

The fears you face may be very real. The anxiety you sense may be caused by deep trauma. But the sense of separation from God is false. Your sins are on Jesus. Jesus took the abandonment you deserve. Jesus suffered it all. That means God will never abandon you. Jesus is with you in the worst of your pain. Jesus is at your side in the middle of your suffering. When you are going through boredom and seeing symptoms of cabin fever, you aren't alone. No matter what your brain tells you or your hearts senses, you have the powerful promise of God: **"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all**

**these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 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.” (Romans 8:35,37-39)**

That doesn't mean today or tomorrow or Easter Sunday will be easy for you. It doesn't mean we aren't going to get tired of this situation if it drags on longer than we expected. It just means we combat feelings of isolation and fears of abandonment with the reality of the cross. Jesus was truly and completely forsaken at the cross. He did it for you. Jesus absorbed that wrath so you can rise each day and consciously commit to your relationship with God. When times get tough, you know your Savior endured the worst pain and agony to keep you in God's grace. Jesus faced absolute separation so you would never wander away from your God.

And because Jesus was forsaken, God never will abandon you! Amen.