

**FINAL WORDS FROM THE CROSS:
“MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”**

Mark 15:29-36a

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While I was pastoring in a suburb of Houston, Texas, I learned that a ministerial colleague of mine was going through a divorce. Having endured that experience myself and knowing how dark and painful it could be, I instinctively picked up the phone and called my Methodist friend. I invited him to lunch where he talked about the personal hell he was living through.

Several months later I ran into this man at a district gathering. He pulled me aside to thank me again for our earlier conversation. Then he told me something astonishing. He said I was the only pastor in the entire Conference who had reached out to him at the time of his divorce. Though his circumstances were widely known, no other clergy persons had even acknowledged what was going on, much less expressed their care and support. He had felt almost totally abandoned by friends and colleagues in the ministry. He was so depressed and disillusioned by this experience that he eventually took a leave of absence from his profession.

I relate this story not to pat myself on the back for being compassionate. What I did was nothing extraordinary; at least it shouldn't have been. Rather, I tell this story to illustrate just how painful it is to feel abandoned. If you have ever loved someone deeply and seen that person walk away, if you have ever endured a physical or emotional crisis without the support of family or friends, you know what it feels like to be abandoned.

According to all four Gospels, Jesus' crucifixion draws an audience. He is surrounded by onlookers during the hours leading up to his death. But according to two of the Evangelists, Matthew and Mark, Jesus feels abandoned, desolate, utterly alone. It's obvious that he is abandoned by a variety of people – by the Roman soldiers who nail him to the cross and cast lots for his garments, by the passersby who deride him, by the religious leaders who mock him, by one of the dying criminals at his side who taunts him. Worst of all, he is abandoned by nearly all his disciples, who disappear into the night to save their own skins. It's understandable that Jesus feels abandoned, because he is abandoned.

But Matthew and Mark describe this sense of abandonment in even more radical terms. They tell us that the crucified Jesus feels abandoned by God. At three o'clock in the afternoon, with darkness covering the whole land, Jesus cries out with a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1).

Of all the things Jesus ever says during his earthly life, this saying is the most mysterious and, for some, the most scandalous. It doesn't square with the image you and I have of Jesus, who always seems close and cozy with his heavenly Father, always trusting in God's presence and provision. It doesn't square with who we know Jesus to be. How could one who shares in God's nature feel separated from God? How could the Son of God feel godforsaken?

Over the years, interpreters have made an effort to soften this saying of Jesus, to make it easier to digest. They point out that Jesus is actually quoting from the 22nd Psalm, which begins

with this famous cry of dereliction. But it's possible that Jesus recites the entire psalm, which starts out as a prayer of complaint but ends on a note of triumph. By this interpretation, the onlookers catch only the opening line; but Jesus speaks other words – more hopeful words – to his own heart and to God: “For [God] did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; [God] did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him. From you comes my praise in the great congregation” (vv. 24-25). While dying on the cross, it may be that Jesus speaks these words, too; it may be that he meditates on the entirety of Psalm 22, with its confidence in God's victory.

But what if he doesn't? What if verse one of this psalm is allowed to stand on its own, as Matthew and Mark actually record it? What if Jesus utters a cry of despair without corresponding words of hope? “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – period! If this is the only part of the psalm Jesus quotes, what are we left with?

To be honest with you, I like what we are left with. We are left with a Jesus who is unmistakably and fully human. We are left with a divine being who enters fully into our humanity, who experiences and understands what it feels like to be abandoned, who even knows what it is like to feel distant from God. What we are left with is not some plastic Jesus who is immune to the suffering and loneliness you and I know. What we are left with is a Brother, Companion, and Friend.

We're also left with a Jesus who, in the midst of doubt, also expresses faith. Has it ever occurred to you that Jesus' cry of dereliction is actually a prayer to God? In the depth of despair, in his moment of godforsakenness, Jesus still cries, “My God, my God.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian who became a part of the resistance movement to Adolph Hitler and the Nazis during World War II. He was imprisoned for his so-called “crimes” against the state. While he was behind bars, he wrote extensively, and many of his writings were preserved in a book entitled *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

In a memorable passage, Bonhoeffer talks about two different ways that people relate to God during a time of crisis. There are those, he says, who choose to talk about God, and there are those who choose to talk with God. Those who talk about God speak of their subject in the third person, as if they were attacking an acquaintance behind his or her back. They withdraw from God and blame God for their troubles. They see God as an absent adversary. By contrast, those who talk with God remain in conversation with God, even if their conversation is full of complaint. In spite of their difficulties, they continue to see God as a source of support and hope.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says he was able to endure his time in prison because he kept talking with God. He maintained the relationship, even when the relationship was rocky. Like the writer of the 22nd Psalm, and like Jesus on the cross, Bonhoeffer protested and grieved; but he never lost faith that God heard and responded to his prayers.

The first two funerals I was ever asked to conduct occurred under dreadful circumstances. The first funeral I officiated was that of a young wife and mother who, in a moment of black despair, jumped to her death from the window of an apartment building on the south side of Chicago. I will never forget the reaction of her husband to this tragedy. Of course, he felt abandoned and desolate, because he was now a widower and the single father of two young girls. But his reaction went beyond this. He announced to me that his relationship with God was over and done with. He said he could no longer believe in a God who allowed this kind of tragedy to

happen. He would never again pray, never again ask God for companionship and support. Notice, this man continued talking about God, but stopped talking with God.

The second funeral I officiated was that of a sixteen-year old boy who died in a high-speed car accident in Champaign, Illinois. His mother was a member of the church I served. I met her at the emergency room in the middle of the night. The coroner pulled me aside to tell me that the boy's face was damaged beyond recognition, and that I needed to help him keep the mother from viewing the body. Over the months that followed, she was haunted by the fact that she never got to see her son again. She didn't have that all-important closure.

She and I continued to have pastoral conversations, and I was struck by two things about this woman. The first was that her sorrow was deep and profound. She lamented her loss; she complained and protested; she cried incessantly. But the other thing that stood out about her reaction was her relationship with God. It remained intact. She didn't blame God or stop believing in God. She prayed more often and more earnestly than she had ever prayed in her life. On many occasions, she had nothing to bring to God but her pain and despair. But she kept coming to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find help in time of need. She didn't just talk about God; she kept talking with God.

In Jesus' most agonizing moment on the cross, he prays. He prays, "My God, my God." His earlier prayer from the cross begins with a more intimate, more affectionate address: "Father." Now there is a distancing between Father and Son. Jesus feels the gap that opens up between them. The sin of the whole world is placed upon his shoulders, and God seems very far off. Still, he prays, "My God," in the confidence that God hears his prayer. Though all the others have abandoned him, he knows in his heart of hearts that God is with him, never closer than when he makes the ultimate sacrifice. As Frederick Dale Bruner says, faith at its deepest level is believing in God when we don't feel God's presence, but still crying out to God.

Let me ask you: when you feel utterly desolate, completely alone, even godforsaken, do you talk about God, or do you talk with God? When you have nothing to say to God but an agonized "Why?", do you say it anyway?