

**“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”  
(The Seven Last Words of Jesus: The Fourth Word)**

Matthew 27:45-54

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian  
Church of Portland, Indiana on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 6, 2016]

I

*And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema  
sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*  
-Matthew 27:46

The Fourth Word from the cross is a transitional word.

Three words come before and three follow.

This Fourth Word is at the center of all that Jesus went through.

One writer calls it the crucifixion within the crucifixion and the tragedy within the tragedy.

Fleming Rutledge says this saying from the cross is the saying to have if you have only one.

*“It is the saying that ‘causes us to tremble,’ but rightly understood, it is also  
the saying that brings the most comfort, because it plumbs the most  
profound depths.”* (The Seven Last Words from the Cross, p. 37.)

The first three words focused on those gathered around the cross,  
as Jesus prays for them and expresses his concern for them.

He prays for forgiveness for the soldiers and the political and religious  
leaders who put him on the cross.

He hears the confession of the criminal beside him and assures him of a  
place in Paradise.

He establishes a new relationship of caring and commitment between his mother and the beloved disciple.

With this Fourth Word the focus shifts to the One on that cross,  
and to the struggle going on in his soul as he hangs suspended between  
heaven and earth.

The struggle that went on within Jesus...

the pain that he felt...

the agony he endured...

the suffering he realized...

the loneliness he experienced...

the humiliation he faced...

the sorrow he embraced...

it all wells up within him as he cries out in utter and absolute despair.....

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

## II

The cry of Jesus from the cross is our cry.

His pain was as real as our pain.

His cry of anguish was as real as our cries of anguish.

There are times in life when we come face to face with situations beyond our  
comprehension and we feel that God has forsaken us.

We pray for a loved one to live,  
and they die.

We pray for an illness to be cured,  
and it is not.

We pray that there might be a positive resolution to conflicts and difficulties  
in our lives,  
and there is none.

In those moments we often have asked the universal question,  
“Why, God, why?”

And we, like Jesus, have known feelings of abandonment by God.

And so we, too, cry out,  
**“Why have you forsaken me?”**

We live in a world where...  
 people disappoint us,  
 circumstances turn against us,  
 and life can be so unfair,  
 so unkind.

We work hard and do our best,  
 and find ourselves passed over for promotion,  
 or even worse, terminated.

We do our best, and our marriage fails anyway.

We do our best, and the kids still end up in trouble.

We do our best, and we still find ourselves  
 disappointed,  
 alone,  
 suffering.

So we ask, as Jesus asked:  
 “God, why do you let this happen to us?”

“God, where are you when we need you?”

“God, why have you forsaken us?”

### III

Jesus’ cry is your cry...  
 and it is mine...  
 and it is the cry of our world

Elie Wiesel, Noble Peace Prize winner and survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp, expresses that cry in his book, Night.

He tells how the inmates of the camp were forced to watch the execution by hanging of three fellow inmates—two men and a young boy.

Wiesel describes the boy as “the little servant, the sad-eyed angel.”

Three victims mount together onto the gallows.

Three nooses are placed around the necks of the condemned prisoners.

A voice in the crowd asks,  
“Where is God? Where is he?”

The three chairs are tipped over; the two adults die quickly.

Wiesel writes:

*“But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive....For more than an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet glazed. Behind me, I heard the same man asking, “Where is God now?”*”

Down through the centuries that question has been asked over and over.

Where was God when six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis?

Where was God when two million Cambodians were murdered by the Khmer Rouge?

Where was God on 9/11 when the planes crashed into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon?

Where was God on December 26, 2004, when the tsunami crashed into the beaches of south Asia, killing over 200,000 people and destroying hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses?

Where was God on December 14, 2012 when a disturbed young man walked into an elementary school on Newtown, Connecticut and shot dead 20 first graders and six educators?

Where is God when the aching, hurting, suffering people of our world cry out,  
as Jesus did,

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

#### IV

How do we cope with those times when we feel abandoned by God,  
when we feel like we are all alone,

when we, like Jesus, cry out in our pain and despair,

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

Jesus on the cross shows us how.

First, Jesus shows us *we must face our feelings*.

This Fourth Word has been called a *cry of dereliction*.

Derelict means abandoned.

A derelict ship is a ship completely deserted,  
drifting without course or direction before the winds.

In that moment on the cross Jesus felt deserted, abandoned, and forsaken.

From those feelings came this honest cry of dereliction.

In that moment, Jesus identified with us in our humanity.

He joined us in our human predicament.

Of course, we all feel forsaken from time to time.

We all have had moments when we have cried out,  
“Why, God, why?”

This Fourth Word from the cross tells us that in such moments we are not alone.

At our most hurt,  
our most frightened,  
our most forsaken by God,

we have a companion who has been there  
and who promises to be with us.

Nothing we say can make him turn away from us.

If we cry out, “Where are you, God? I’m all alone here,”  
Jesus said it first.

If all we can do is cry out,  
he cried out too.

But when we do, it is best that we, like Jesus, face those feelings of  
godforsakenness,  
and realize that when we cry out to God,  
*“Why have you forsaken me?”*  
Jesus is with us in our feelings of abandonment.

V

But even more than facing those feelings,  
*Jesus faced God with those feelings.*

That made all the difference in the world for him,  
and it makes all the difference in the world for us.

Remember that the Fourth Word is addressed to God:  
**“My God, my God....”**

It was not addressed to the people standing at the foot of the cross.

It was not flung out into the vastness of space...  
it was addressed to his God.

Jesus never questions,  
as we sometimes are tempted to do,  
the existence of God or his relationship with God.

Forsaken.....yes.

Abandoned.....yes.

Suffering.....yes.

In terrible pain.....yes.

Alone.....yes.

But God is still his God.

And Jesus talks to God and faces God honestly with his feelings.

Even in his most godforsaken moment, Jesus still prays, "My God."

Jesus died talking to his *Abba*, his Father,  
who in that moment did not talk back to him.

Hearing no voice of love,  
Jesus cried out,  
making a sound that for you, me, and countless others,  
became the voice of love.

Is there any other definition of faith?

So in his suffering, Jesus is the comfort of those who have no comfort.

In his abandonment, Jesus is the God of those who have no God.

So let me ask you:

Do you feel forsaken right now?

Do you feel like the bottom of life has dropped out,  
and you are not loved,  
no one cares?

Don't turn away from God with those feelings;  
turn toward God.

Do you feel abandoned and rejected,  
your love betrayed,  
your trust violated?

Don't turn away from God with those feelings;  
turn toward God.

Are you full of doubt?

Are you asking within yourself,  
"Is there a God?  
Can I believe?  
Is life worth living?"

Don't turn away from God with those feelings;  
turn toward God.

Never is it wrong to have such feelings.

Jesus had them.

The secret is to face those feelings,  
and then to face God with them.

## VI

Jesuit priest James Martin reminds us,

*"We do not pray to a God who does not appreciate the difficulties of our lives. We do not have a God who looks down on us from on high and merely pities us, as a wealthy person might pass a homeless person on the street and say, 'what a shame.'"*

Jesus suffered alone on that cross,  
that you and I might never be alone.

Jesus was forsaken of God,  
that you might never be forsaken.

Jesus went down into the ultimate depths of sin and shame,  
that you might never have to go down alone.

Jesus experienced the forsakenness of death,  
that you might know the forgiveness and fulfillment of new life.



**Never was heaven nearer to earth than when Jesus cried out from the cross,  
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**

When Elie Wiesel stood in the crowd at Auschwitz that day and watched that young boy slowly die, he heard a voice in the crowd saying,  
*“Where is God now?”*

He writes:

*“I heard a voice within me answer ...  
‘Where is God?  
Here God is—  
God is hanging here on this gallows...!’”*

Amen.

Sources:

Leighton Farrell, Cries from the Cross: Sermons on the Seven Last Words of Jesus, Abingdon, 1994, 40-50.

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Fleming Rutledge, The Seven Last Words from the Cross, Eerdmans, 2005, 37.

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Elie Wiesel, Night, Hill and Wang, 1972, translation copyright 2006.