

This sermon was delivered on March 31, 2010 in Elkins Auditorium as part of Pepperdine University's Holy Week service, sponsored by the Chaplain's Office.

## **Forsaken**

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*"Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"*

The crowds were chanting and cheering as Jesus entered Jerusalem that day. We call it the "triumphal entry," and some churches celebrate it by having a palm processional and shouting hosannas. Little did anyone know that just a few short days later, crowds would not be shouting "blessed," but murmuring "cursed." Instead of being praised as the son of David, Jesus would be mocked as the alleged "Son of God."

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? <sup>2</sup>O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.*

Have you ever prayed these words? Ever cried out to God – where are you?!

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* I felt forsaken by God when my grandmother died and I never got to say goodbye to her... I felt forsaken by God when I was 18, and my fiancée cheated on me and left me broken...

Have you ever felt forsaken by God? In our darkest hour, sometimes it feels as if God has left us, turned his back on us. Maybe you felt forsaken by God when...

- you were caught in the middle of your parents' ugly divorce
- someone close to you was suddenly and tragically taken from this world
- a relationship ended and left you struggling to breathe.

Maybe you feel forsaken by God right now. If that's where you are, I want you to hear that you are not alone.

You are not alone. In his darkest hour, his most desperate moment, Jesus felt forsaken by God. Jesus felt that raw, aching feeling of being utterly alone and destroyed. Jesus felt those deepest, soul-ripping emotions that we feel. He gave words to those feelings when he cried out in the words of the Psalmist, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!"

Jesus quotes this first line of the twenty-second Psalm as he is hanging from the cross in bitter agony. In Matthew's account of Jesus' crucifixion, these are the only words that Jesus speaks from the cross. They are the only words, and they have left many of us scratching our heads, trying to figure out what they mean.

Did God *actually* leave Jesus? Did Jesus lose his divinity for those moments on the cross? Is this because God can't die? Is this because God had to separate himself from Jesus so that the sacrifice could be fulfilled?

A lot of us - scholars, ministers, and laypeople - have taken great pains to try to explain just how God could have abandoned Jesus in what was arguably his most vulnerable moment. But, if we

look to the whole of Psalm 22 we see a picture not of abandonment, but of trust. I'd like to share with you this Psalm:

### **Psalm 22 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup>**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?** Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

<sup>2</sup>O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

<sup>3</sup>Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

<sup>4</sup>In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.

<sup>5</sup>To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

<sup>6</sup>But I am a worm, and not human; **scorned by others, and despised by the people.**

<sup>7</sup>**All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;**

<sup>8</sup>“Commit your cause to the Lord; **let him deliver — let him rescue the one in whom he delights!**”

<sup>9</sup>Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast.

<sup>10</sup>On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

<sup>11</sup>Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

<sup>12</sup>Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

<sup>13</sup>they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

<sup>14</sup>**I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my chest;**

<sup>15</sup>my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.

<sup>16</sup>For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shriveled;

<sup>17</sup>I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me;

<sup>18</sup>**they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.**

<sup>19</sup>But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!

<sup>20</sup>Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog!

<sup>21</sup>Save me from the mouth of the lion! From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

<sup>22</sup>I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

<sup>23</sup>You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

<sup>24</sup>For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

<sup>25</sup>From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

<sup>26</sup>The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live forever!

<sup>27</sup>**All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.**

<sup>28</sup>For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

<sup>29</sup>To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.

<sup>30</sup>**Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord,**

**<sup>31</sup>and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.**

Some of you who are familiar with the Passion narratives may see where I'm going with this...Jesus only needed to quote one line...

In the ancient world, where stories were memorized and shared orally, when Jesus quoted that first line of Psalm 22, the onlookers and later hearers would have immediately called to mind the rest of the Psalm. They would have seen Jesus crying out to God as the Psalmist did – truly feeling *as if* God had abandoned him.

The psalmist said I am “**scorned by others, and despised by the people...**” Jesus certainly felt this as he was ridiculed and sarcastically “honored” as the king of the Jews...

The psalmist said <sup>18</sup>**“they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.”** Matthew tells us about how the soldiers cast lots to determine who would get Jesus’ clothes.

The psalmist describes himself as being “**poured out like water,**” with his “**bones out of joint...**” While the Psalmist spoke in metaphors, Jesus’ bones were physically pulled out of joint as he hung on the cross... and as his side was pierced, he was literally poured out. Jesus needed only to quote that first line...

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* But the Psalmist doesn’t end there, and we should assume that neither did Jesus. We journey with Jesus and the Psalmist all the way to the closing line “They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: **He has done it!**” And so we—as those “yet unborn”—we rejoice with generations of people, transcending time and space to declare that Jesus has redeemed us – God has done it!

But what does that mean for us? To simply say that “God has done it...” In our very real, very tangible brokenness...in our times of feeling utterly forsaken by God...what does this mean for us?

I propose that it gives us hope. We wait at the foot of the cross, and outside the tomb. We wait expectantly, and hopefully. We wait for Jesus to come back and redeem us as he promised that he would. We trust in God just as Jesus trusted in God.

We cry out to God “why have you forsaken me?” And we trust God to see us through. We hold onto that shred of faith in the God who says he will never leave us or forsake us. We trust in the one who has done it, and we have faith that he will do it again.

During this holy week, we anticipate Jesus’ crucifixion, and we live in the days between his crucifixion and his resurrection. We live with that very real feeling of forsakenness, and we search for hope. Any glimmer of light that tells us that this is not over yet. Jesus’ death was not the final act. In our darkest hour, when we feel abandoned and broken...With Jesus’ followers, we hold onto hope that God will deliver Jesus, and that he will also deliver us.