

MY GOD, WHY?

Matthew 27:45-50

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Palm Sunday, April 2, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 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?'

When some of the bystanders heard it, they said,

'This man is calling for Elijah.'

At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said,

'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.'

Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

I.

As we move from the cries of "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" that greeted the triumphal return of Jesus to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, a mere five days later, on Good Friday we encounter another series of memorable words: "The Seven Last Words of Christ." If you worship with us this week, you will hear them scattered throughout our music and services, leading up our proclamation this time next week: "Christ the Lord is Risen Today!"

The "seven last words" are spread throughout all four Gospels. Six of the seven exhibit, for the most part, Christ's sheer strength of character, faith, determination on the cross:

- Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.¹
- Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.²
- Woman, behold, thy son! Behold, thy mother!³
- I thirst.⁴
- It is finished.⁵

¹ Luke 23:34.

² Luke 23:43.

³ John 19:26-27,

⁴ John 19:28.

⁵ John 19:30.

- Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.⁶

Only one of the seven last words appear in more than one Gospel. So dramatic is it that when it appears in Matthew and Mark, it is quoted in the original Aramaic in which the dying Jesus spoke it:

‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’

And then it is immediately translated:

*‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’*⁷

**

For centuries, theologians have labelled this last word the “The Cry of Dereliction.”

‘My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?’

“Why?”

“God, why?”

“My God, why?”

The older we get the greater the likelihood that we have experienced some great suffering or setback that has brought us close to uttering something like these words ourselves:

“My God, why?”

Presbyterians in Nashville are simply the latest to utter them this week of violent death and this weekend of funerals for children and their educators.

“My God, why?”

II.

As you might imagine, the same theologians and preachers who label the “The Cry of Dereliction” cannot seem from keeping ourselves from seeking to soften its implications, sometimes appearing even to deny what through these words Christ is plainly saying.

- Some argue that in his physical pain and suffering, Jesus merely *perceives* that God has abandoned him on the cross. Most of us know that when we are emotionally distraught or physically ill, we feel more *desperate* than we often are, more *alone*, more *threatened*. At such times, we strain to see a *trace* of God’s hand, a *touch* of God’s Spirit, a *sign* of God’s presence. *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*⁸
- Others point out that in Jesus’ time reciting the opening line of a psalm was sometimes a way of pointing to the entire psalm, much as we might say the first line of a song and then play the words over and over in our mind all day long. In this interpretation of “The Cry of Dereliction,” Jesus is saying the

⁶ Luke 23:46.

⁷ Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34.

⁸ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 98.

first line of Psalm 22, as a way of reminding himself of lines that follow that can give him strength in his hour of need, such as verses 9-11 of the same psalm:

*Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast...
...since my mother bore me you have been my God.
Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.*

I may have shared with you before that one of the ministers in the deep South who shaped me in my youth worked so hard and cared so deeply that he had several heart attacks between his early forties and late fifties. One of these landed him in an emergency room. The decision was made for immediate surgery. From his gurney the minister turned to a longtime friend and fellow pastor, who was present with his wife. The minister on the gurney said, "I want to confess my faith." Then he grasped the hand of his friend and his wife and lead them in saying, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord..."

The last words this minister wanted to say for strength and courage before being put to sleep were words he said every Sunday in worship. He was saying them liturgically, not theologically. He was saying them for the comfort and strength they gave him, not for the theological precision and clarity they were written to achieve centuries earlier. "I believe in the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting..."

And he survived the surgery to lead congregations in saying these words for several more decades.

III.

As appealing as is the possibility that Jesus is pointing to other words in the psalm for strength and comfort, this interpretation runs the risk of avoiding the full implications of the title by which this last word goes: "The Cry of Dereliction."

I am more persuaded by those theologians and writers who argue that in his death – by one of the cruelest means known to humanity – Jesus Christ as God was *utterly alone*. In a way that hold two truths in our minds at the same time, something we are almost always taught not to do, in his death on the cross, though Christ himself *was* God, he was *without God*. "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"

In this utter aloneness, Jesus fully identifies with "our compromised, absurd human condition"⁹ – the condition we call Sin – that gives rise to events like Nashville and millions of other similar acts of cruelty and senselessness day in and day out all over our dearly created but horribly fallen world. In his death by crucifixion:

- Jesus completely enters the *desperation* of our human condition.¹⁰
- He completely experiences the *suffering* and *heartache* and *coldness* and *violence* and *godlessness* of the world.

⁹ Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 97.

¹⁰ Ibid.

- He does not just *see* it or *feel* it or *analyze* it or *observe* it or *treat* it from a distance or *experience* it momentarily, nor does he *wave a magic wand* to make it all go away.
- Rather, in his death on the cross, Christ completely enters the *darkness* of our darkest days, the *coldness* of our coldest hours, the *silence* of our most unanswered prayers and unpleasant aloneness.

In his death and resurrection,

- Jesus Christ *takes* these upon himself.
- He *absorbs* them into his very being.
- He *bears* their emotional toll in his soul and their physical scars in his body.
- He cries the cries our tear ducts have long grown too dry to cry.

And Christ does not do this simply as *human being* suffering great pain on our behalf; as a *martyr* willing to give his life to save us; as a *sacrifice* offering himself to appease the wrath of an angry God or satisfy God's sense and definition of justice.

Rather, Jesus suffers the crucifixion *as God*. He enters this supreme act of suffering as *an irreducible part of the Trinity*. His entering into our God-forsakenness is a joint project of Father/Son/Spirit. In a way beyond our understanding, as are most matters Trinitarian, each person of the Trinity suffers in the death of Christ.¹¹

Thus, as we stand beneath the cross of Christ, *opposite* but *equal* truths concerning the crucifixion enter our hearts and minds:

- God is *present*. God is *absent*.
- God is *weak*. God is *strong*.
- God is *separated* from God's self. God is *united* with God's self.
- In God's *God-forsakenness*, God has *not* been forsaken, nor has God forsaken us.

In the cross of Christ, we have *presence in absence... absence in presence*.

IV.

Even though asserting that "presence" and "absence" co-exist at the cross is an assertion that disrupts our logical way of thinking, to me this is the best way to believe in God in the midst of a world whose fallenness and evil we experience far more than we desire and sometimes more than we feel we can tolerate.

The image that best helps me understand the "The Cry of Dereliction" is *Absorption*.¹²

- God enters the condition of godlessness in our world and even in our individual lives so as to *absorb* the power Sin and Evil that has pushed God aside or made God barely perceptible to us.

¹¹ Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 100.

¹² *Ibid.*, 103.

- God defeats these two Powers by *taking them into* God's very *heart* and *soul* and *mind* and *body* and *being* – by “absorbing” them.
- This absorption provides something of a *shield* for us, and – I believe – serves as a basis for to join God in resisting these Powers of Sin and Death when they rear their heads nearby in places where we can actually do something – large or small – to hold them at oppose them.¹³

This action of absorption of the Powers of Sin and Death do not represent a change in God, but rather reflect the truest identity of God as Father/Son/Spirit. It is to this truest character of God that we can commit ourselves to responsible action in the world God has placed us.

V.

This past month I have read several profound articles about the ongoing struggle in our nation and world to find a more moral, humane, civilized footing. To become *community* again. *Human community*. To become a *people*. To recover or find a *politics* that works, as much as politics ever does. To shield ourselves as much as possible from the powers of Sin and Death.

I have been struck by the closing paragraphs of one article I read by the longtime Washington writer/critic/philosopher Leon Wieseltier, a person to whose writings and wisdom I have turned for forty years. The particular article is entitled “Problems and Struggles.”¹⁴

Wieseltier argues that most of what is worthwhile for any society consists of long *struggles* that require *persistence* and *patience*, rather than *problems* that have *quick* and *easy* solutions.

If we prefer to see ourselves as a nation of *problem-solvers* [he writes], it may be in part because we prefer to look away from the *strugglers* in our midst. Having completed their tasks, *problem-solvers* proceed to the most typical American activity of all: they move on. But the *strugglers* cannot move on...

He then pays tribute to the community in America that has both *struggled* the most and *stuck with* the struggle.

...no Americans have a more natural understanding of struggle than black Americans [he writes]. Their emancipation, which we treat as a *discrete historical event* circa 1863, was (in the words of one historian) “the *long* emancipation.”

The story of African American culture [he continues] is a story of *melancholy* and its *mastery*. There is *joy* in the blues, which is not the case with many other traditions of sad song. The slave songs and the spirituals are intimate with the “*trouble* of the world,” but I have never heard one of them recommend *surrender*.

*O me no weary yet,
O me no weary yet,
I have a witness in my heart,
O me no weary yet.*

The slaves sang: “*Lord, make me more patient.*”

¹³ Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 415.

¹⁴ Leon Wieseltier, “Problems and Struggles,” *Liberties* 3, no. 2 (Winter 2023), <https://libertiesjournal.com/articles/problems-and-struggles/>.

They sang: *“Hold out to the end.”*

In the words of poet Sterling A. Hayden:

*Guess we'll give it one mo' try,
Guess we'll give it one mo' try.*

In the defeat and victory through which we walk this week, in the God being absent and the God being present to which we bear witness this week, in the move from problem solving to struggle, do you think we can join together and say:

*Lord, make me more patient.
Hold out to the end.
Guess we'll give it one mo' try.*

Amen.