

*"And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' That is, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?'" - Matt 27:46 (similarly in Mark 15:34)*



The traditional teaching about this verse is that Jesus was calling out to His Father in desperate heartfelt prayer. Further, it is said that Jesus cried out because He sensed that His Father had turned away from Him. It is proposed that the explanation for this turning away is that Jesus had become sin, and the Father could not look upon sin. At first blush this all sounds plausible, but is there any scholarly support for this traditional teaching? Is there another explanation?

The reason it is said Jesus was praying is because He was quoting from Psalm 22:1; and the words of many of the Psalms are clearly prayers that were to be sung. Certainly Psalm 22 reads like a prayer in many respects. But we know that above all, Psalm 22 is a key prophecy that identifies Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus, as the Lord that dealt with David, inspired David to record this prophetic psalm. Jesus knew this psalm quite well.

Why is it said that the Father turned away from Jesus? The word forsaken can mean either left behind or abandoned, the latter implying a turning away. But also verse 2 of Psalm 22 reads in part, "O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear..." Jesus cried only the first line of verse 1. But knowing from which Psalm Jesus was quoting, it is assumed that this next verse must have applied to what He was experiencing on the stake.

Not hearing implies a turning away, at least as in turning a deaf ear. If one considers the nature of a prayer, there is little point in continuing if it is not being heard. Yet reading further in Psalm 22, it is clear that it is heard, as verse 21 states, "You have answered me." We know that Jesus did not die with the Father turned away from Him and not hearing Him. This is because Luke 23:46 tells us that after Jesus cried out with a loud voice, Jesus prayed, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Luke tells us that after this communication Jesus breathed His last human breath.

Did Jesus become sin? II Corinthians 5:21 reads, "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." In Isaiah chapter 53, verse 6 reads in part, "And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all," and verse 12 reads in part, "And He bore the sin of many." Finally, I Peter 2:24 states in part, "who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree..." Jesus was the perfect unblemished sacrifice - the Lamb of God - the only kind that could be accepted to pay for our sins. And Jesus did bear our sins, paying the death penalty for sinning mankind. But does God always look away from sin?

Jesus had spent much time in prayer prior to His torture and crucifixion (Mark 14:32-42). The closeness of Jesus' relationship with His Father is beyond our ability to imagine. Jesus had the spirit without measure (John 3:34). As the pre-existing Word, and as the Lord, He inspired all the scriptures and prophecies of His sojourn in human form. He knew exactly what events would transpire after He was taken from the Garden of Gethsemane, including His resurrection after three days and three nights (Matt. 12:39-40). Why then would He cry out in any sense of surprise, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?"

Jesus was only moments away from death when He cried out, no doubt very weak and in great pain. Many individuals pray continually during episodes of torture and suffering, and perhaps Jesus had been praying silently in such a manner. The words that Jesus spoke to various individuals while on the stake are recorded in the gospels (Matt. 27:46 and Mark 15:34, Luke 23:34, 43, 46, John 19:26-28, 30).

Yet despite His desperate condition, the scripture tells us that near the end "Jesus cried out with a loud voice." Did He do so because He had begun to pray Psalm 22 and simply had no strength to get beyond the first line? Or did He do so in order that those within earshot, gathered on Golgotha and witnessing His suffering, would have their attention drawn to Psalm 22?

At that time, personal copies of scriptures were generally not owned by individuals. There were no printing presses. But scriptures were read every Sabbath in the synagogues. People of that time are said to have committed much to memory, compared to what we do today. In any event, the pattern of words in the first verse of Psalm 22 is unique and could be used to identify the psalm in question. No doubt many of those that heard Jesus cry out would have seriously pondered His last words.

Upon identifying and reflecting on the full content of Psalm 22, they would have been overwhelmed at the correlation between the content of the psalm and the events they had witnessed - events that were still all too fresh in their minds. This would provide solid confirmation that they had witnessed firsthand the suffering of the Messiah. Further, when Jesus cried out, He did so in Aramaic, the local dialect that would be understood by those gathered around. If it was just a personal prayer, why would he choose Aramaic? Why was it recorded that he spoke in Aramaic, if not for the significance of him choosing it?

Most of Jesus' disciples had hoped and expected that after His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, Jesus would overthrow the Roman government, free the people, and become their ruling King (Luke 19:11; 24:21). They were stunned and disheartened that He was convicted and executed. Jesus had been giving the disciples heads up notices concerning His imminent suffering and death (Matt. 12:40; 17:22-23; 20:18-19, Mark 10:45, John 2:19-21; 10:10-11). But apparently these had just not registered or sunk in. The disciples needed to understand that Jesus was sacrificed that all might live, and that prophecies of His suffering must come to pass before prophecies of His future rule as King of Kings could take place.

In all examples of Jesus clearly praying, He always prayed to his Father (Matt. 11:25-26; 26:39-42, Mark 14:26, Luke 10:21, 22:42, 23:34, 36, 23:46, John 11:41; 12:27-28, 14:16, 17:1, 5, 11, 21, 24-25). He used no other word as a form of address in prayer. And Jesus taught us to pray to the Father (Matt. 6:8-18). Yet, Psalm 22 uses the less personal word God. But if Jesus was simply quoting or reciting from Psalm 22 for the benefit of those that would hear Him, this might explain why He did not cry "Father", as He did later, immediately before he died (Luke 23:46). Were Jesus actually choosing to begin truly praying the words of Psalm 22, one could make a case that He had chosen to pray the psalm as written. But we can't know that He was praying Psalm 22:1, as opposed to simply quoting its opening words so as to draw the attention of those present to the great and very timely import of this prophetic psalm.

It was Jesus Himself, as the Lord known in the Old Testament, that had inspired David to record Psalm 22. That He would suffer as He did was no surprise to Him. Yet, it appears that Jesus did indeed have an important reason to quote Himself, as it were, shortly before He took His last breath. And to this day, Psalm 22 remains a powerful testament to the identity of Jesus as the Messiah who came, suffered, and died for us, and will return again as King during the Millennium.

Jesus bore our sins so that our death penalty could be paid, and in this sense became sin, though He was in fact actually sinless. Does God always look away from sin? Must God turn His head from it? There are any number of scriptures that portray God as casting sin far away or out of sight. It seems God does not like to have sin nearby, at least not for very long. Eventually, the Universe will be ridded of sin. In the Atonement ceremony, the sins of the people were confessed on the head of a goat that was led away to be lost in the wilderness (Lev. 16:21). This is a type of sending Satan far away.

There are a few scriptures that some believe indicate that God could or will destroy Satan at some time (Ezek.28:16-19, Mark 1:24, Heb. 2:14). But at a minimum, Satan is portrayed in prophecy as being cast out into darkness, away from the Kingdom of God where there is, by contrast, continual light (Rev. 21:23-25). God has not yet destroyed Satan and if Satan is cast out instead of being destroyed, that is God's prerogative.

There are numerous instances when God has looked upon and dealt directly with sin, beginning when the Lord told Cain that Abel's blood cried out to Him from the ground (Gen. 4:10). The Lord, accompanied by two angels, came to investigate first hand the seriousness of the sinful and perverse activities going on in Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:20-21). Jesus Himself was seen associating with winebibbers, tax collectors, and other sinners (Matt. 11:19). There is no clear scriptural basis to conclude that the Father would look away just before Jesus died. When Abraham was instructed to sacrifice Isaac, a foretype of the Father sacrificing His Son Jesus, Abraham was not told to look away before plunging the knife into his son. And indeed, Abraham had raised the knife to do so when he was told to stop (Gen. 22:10-12).

Before we accept traditional interpretations or the conventional wisdom about what the Bible says, it is helpful to analyze each teaching carefully. We must ask what each scripture says, what it doesn't say, and who was being spoken to for what purpose. The historical context is often very important to consider. In the case when Jesus cried out loudly in Aramaic, we do know that the words He cried pointed to the confirmation of His identity to all within earshot. And His crying was important enough to be recorded in two of the gospel accounts.

How like a loving Savior it would be for Him to be thinking of others and His mission while enduring great pain. Jesus had communicated with others present, including those crucified on either side of Him. While on the stake, He assigned the care of His mother Mary to His disciple John. The effort to cry aloud and be heard by all those gathered around surely held an important purpose.

Jesus was not forsaken (left behind or deserted) for long. As noted above, Jesus prayed after His crying out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). His Father brought Him out of the tomb in a resurrection after three days and three nights, as Jesus knew His Father would do.

It is important to note that a significant portion of Psalm 22 has not yet taken place, because Jesus is not yet ruling over all nations on the earth. But that day is sure. It was inspired by the One who is True - by the very One that cried out. That same Jesus will return again with great noise and fanfare and His cry at that time will capture the attention of all who dwell on the Earth (1 Thes. 4:16, Rev. 19:11-16). All will see His appearing (Matt. 24:30). The prophecies of Psalm 22 will be completely fulfilled by the Messiah that inspired its writing.

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