

JESUS' DESPAIR

The title of tonight's message is deliberately provocative. The idea that Jesus, the Son of God, could actually fall into despair is unsettling, to say the least. After all, despair is synonymous with hopelessness, and the idea that the One Who came to give us hope might himself have become hopeless is almost unthinkable. Yet it is hard to make anything else out of his words, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* They can only mean that Jesus felt that He had been deserted by His Father and left to die alone, surrounded by gloating enemies.

At no other place in the Scriptures do we see the human side of Jesus as clearly as we do here. And I don't think we're comfortable with that. I don't think we like the idea that Jesus was as vulnerable as we are to pain and temptation and fear and—yes—despair. We prefer to think of him as existing in a higher sphere than we do—as MORE than human. And according to his divine nature He was. But Jesus was also man—fully man. And as a man nailed to a cross, shut off from communion with His heavenly Father, Jesus was overcome by despair.

There were three things that plunged him into despair. First, there was the shame. He had proclaimed Himself to be the Savior of mankind, and now He was forced to hang up there naked between two criminals while His enemies mocked him. *"Come down from the cross and save yourself!"* they taunted, and, *"He saved others but He can't save Himself!"* Scorn, ridicule, insults, head-shaking, eye-rolling: it was sarcasm's finest hour. Jesus was bathed in shame.

Then there was the physical agony: spikes driven through flesh and bone into wood and His entire weight suspended from his wrists and his ankles. Can you imagine? Any motion in one part of his body would increase the pain in another part of his body. Flies swarming around him, searing thirst, body cramps: the physical pain was beyond description, and sometimes it took as long as three days for a person to die. All there was to hope for was the dislocation of your own shoulders which led to suffocation. That's what it was like to suffer and die on a cross.

But far more than both of these, was the spiritual agony. That pain was so staggering it made the rest of the ordeal seem paltry by comparison. Jesus had come to pay the penalty for sin—not just for some sin, but for all the sins of mankind from Adam to Armageddon. And what is the penalty for sin? Not only physical death which puts an end to our lives in this world, but suffering the agonies of hell which last forever. To pay the penalty for human sin Jesus had to suffer not only physical death on the cross but the torments of eternal hell compressed into six hours.

That kind of suffering is beyond human comprehension. The prospect of enduring it had caused Jesus to pray on the night before, “*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me,*” and we are told that, “*being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.*” (Luke 22:42,44) This was the agony caused him to cry out from the cross: “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*”

These words from the cross are surely the most anguished words that have ever been uttered. Jesus was seized by the primal fear that has gnawed at human beings ever since sin separated us from God and from each other: the fear of being abandoned and left to suffer and die utterly alone. Just as the love of our brothers and sisters in Christ gives us a foretaste of heaven, our fear of being left alone to die gives us a foretaste of hell. Jesus suffered both: total abandonment and the agonies of hell—along with the knowledge that His own Father had willed it to be so.

But we must never forget that with Jesus, everything is turned upside down. Everything. And in this case, even Jesus’ words of despair actually point the way to hope. You see, the words that Jesus, the son of David, spoke from the cross had been written by David himself over a thousand years before:

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me?
I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by men and despised by the people.
All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:
“He trusts in the Lord—let the Lord rescue him...
They have pierced my hands and my feet.
I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me,
They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing....”*

It’s been said that the words of the Psalms come directly from God’s heart. Maybe that’s why David—a man after the Lord’s own heart—was able to speak them. Jesus often quoted the Psalms and applied them to Himself. It was a practice among rabbis like Jesus to invoke an entire Psalm by reciting its first verse. So by quoting the first verse of *Psalm 22*, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”—Jesus was pointing his listeners to the hope expressed at the end of the Psalm: “*Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother’s breast. From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother’s womb you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.*” (Psalm 22:9-11)

During those six fatal hours on the cross, Jesus the man was reduced to despair—and to faith. He was like Job, who in the midst of his suffering could only say, “*Though [God] slay me, yet will I hope in him.*” (Job 13:15) As Peter writes, “*When they hurled their insults at*

him, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly,” and entrusting yourself to God is called faith. Communion with His Father was broken and God had turned away from His Son because his Son had become sin itself—and a Holy God cannot be in the presence of sin. In order to pour out His grace upon us, God had to pour out death and hell upon His Son. That was the price of our salvation.

And when our time comes and we embark on the journey that everyone must take alone, it is faith alone that will draw us through. As we sing in one of our hymns: *“When I tread the verge of Jordan, Bid my anxious fears subside. Death of death and hell’s destruction: Land me safe on Canaan’s side!”* (*“Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah”*) Faith is no more and no less than believing in your heart that God will abide with you through thick and thin. Faith connected Jesus to His Father at his darkest hour and faith connects us to Jesus who went where we could not possibly go, so that one day we can go to be where He is.

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

“Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you, even at my mother’s breast.

“Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him.”

All glory and laud and honor be to Him who in all things works for the good of those who love Him.

Amen.