

Christ is Lord of History

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Psalter 261

Read: Revelation 5

Text: Revelation 5:5–7

Psalter 3

Psalter 48:1–4

Psalter 200

The Lord Christ suffered His whole life, but, when considering His suffering, we think particularly of the spiritual and physical suffering He bore on the way to the cross and upon it. Knowing that these sufferings were to come, He asked of His Father, in Matthew 26:39, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” The idea of the suffering He would yet endure threatened to overwhelm Him, but He trusted His Father and said, “Not as I will, but as thou wilt.” He suffered when His friends betrayed Him. He suffered when both the church and the state put Him on trial. He suffered when the soldiers beat and mocked Him. He suffered the humiliation and physical pain of being executed on the cross. But above all, He suffered the pain of hell as He was engulfed in His Father’s wrath.

Jesus came to earth to suffer. Jesus said, “For this cause came I unto this hour” (John 12:27). He came to die, “for except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone, but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” (John 12:24). In His suffering and death, He ransomed a people for Himself. He died so that, by glorifying Himself in the redemption of His people and in the condemnation of others, the decree of God could come to pass. Christ’s suffering was the vehicle for the fulfillment of the plan of God.

In Revelation 5, we have a heavenly view of the suffering of Christ and its effects. Our text is Revelation 5:5–7, and through it we will examine the first half of

the chapter. “And one of the elders saith unto me, weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof. And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth. And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne.”

In this text we see that Jesus Christ is the Lord of history as the Lion who conquered, the Lamb who was slain, and the Lord who opens the book.

Christ is Lord of History as...

1. the Lion who conquered
2. the Lamb who was slain
3. the Lord who opens the book

1. Jesus Christ is the Lord of history as the Lion who conquered.

Our chapter opens with a crisis. No one is found worthy to open the book. The opening verses of our chapter (5:1–4) read, “And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof? And no man in heaven, nor in the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon. And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon.” The one sitting on the throne is God, and He has in His hand a book, or a scroll. The scroll details the rest of history. Chapters 6 and 7 unveil the contents of the scroll: the scroll contains all the prophecies, judgments, and happenings to come. This scroll “is written within and on the backside”; it is

written on both sides to show that the prophecy is full and complete.

But the crisis is this: there is no one worthy “to loose the seals thereof” (v. 2). Verse 3 says that no one anywhere in the whole universe is able to open the book. Why do you think no one was found to open the book? Does verse 4 say there was no one found who was smart enough? who was strong enough? who was pretty or handsome enough? No; verse 4 says, “no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon.” What does it mean to be “found worthy”? Being found worthy means to be found sufficient for the task, being able to do it, or having enough value to do it. The same word is used by John the Baptist when he says, in John 1:27, “He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose,” and Paul uses the same word in 1 Timothy 5:18 when he says, “The labourer is worthy of his reward.”

Why was no one sufficient or valuable enough? Paul tells us in Romans 3. In Romans 3:12, he uses a word that is opposite of “worthy”: “unprofitable.” He says, “They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no not one.” Paul is quoting two psalms. Psalm 14:3 says, “They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one,” and Psalm 53:3 says, “Every one of them is gone back: they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” The truth that no one is worthy and that we are all unprofitable and can do no good is so important that the Bible repeats it many times.

I trust we all believe in the doctrine of total depravity. We agree with the Belgic Confession of Faith, Article 14, which says of man, “Being thus become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways, he hath lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from

God,” and the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 3, Q/A #8 which says, “Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness? Indeed, we are, except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.”

You may agree with the truth of man’s depravity, but how do you respond to it? How do you respond to our unworthiness? Do you respond like the Apostle John in verse 4? “And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon.” You may not shed actual tears like John, but does it grip you like it gripped John? Do you realize what it means that no one, not even you, is worthy? Has the reality struck you that the divine purpose of God for all things could not come to pass unless one was found who was worthy? Have you ever realized and felt that you, in Adam and by your own personal sins, are responsible for our being worthy of condemnation?

Praise be to the Lord that the book of Revelation does not end at verse 4 of chapter 5. Verse 5 says, “And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.” It is as if the elder tells John, “Look, John; don’t cry; don’t despair; the Lion has come, and He is worthy because He has been victorious.” This Lion is none other than the Lord Jesus Himself. Both these names, “the Lion of the tribe of Judah,” and “the Root of David,” are titles for the Messiah.

In verse 5, the Christ prevailing over all is the prominent idea. In the original, the word “prevailed” is placed before the two Messianic titles. The words of the elder highlight the prevailing, or the victory of the Lion. We could say that the elder tells John to look at the victorious Lion of the tribe of Judah and Root of David.

The Lion of the tribe of Judah is the prophesied

deliverer and promised king. In Genesis 49:9–10, when Jacob is blessing his sons, we read, “Judah is a lion’s whelp: from the prey, my son, thou art gone up: he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall rouse him up? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be.”

He is also “the Root of David.” David was the warrior-king. David solidified the kingdom of Israel and took full possession of the Promised Land. The Lord blessed him and subdued all his enemies. In Revelation 22:16, we read, “I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.” In Isaiah 11:1–2, we read, “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.”

Jesus Christ, the mighty King and Worthy One, has prevailed! He has come and He has won victory. No one has been found worthy but Him; He is worthy because He has prevailed.

It is to this worthy one that the elder directs the Apostle John. Amid his weeping at the hopelessness of the situation, John is directed to look at the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the Root of David. John knew he was not worthy. He knew no one was worthy except one: the Lord Jesus. It is to Jesus that the elder directs his attention—and it is to Jesus that we also must look.

If you have been gripped by the truth of the doctrine of total depravity, you know like John that no one is worthy; you must look to Christ. You can look nowhere else. You must look to the prophesied Messiah and the

promised King. He alone is worthy to open the seals. We are not worthy; it is our fault that sin and misery dominate this world. But Jesus Christ, the victorious Lion, has proven Himself to be the Lord of history. He alone is worthy to loose the seven seals so that the plan of God can continue to unfold. It is to the Lion that we must look.

John looks, and this brings us to our second point:

2. Jesus Christ is the Lord of history as the Lamb who was slain.

John looks, and what does he see? In verse 6 we read, “And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain.” John does not see a Lion; he sees a Lamb—and not just a Lamb, but a Lamb standing after it had been slain.

The elder told John to look to the victorious Lion, but instead he sees a Lamb that has been killed, but is standing. What a mystery! John looks, and in the middle of everything, in the middle of the throne room, in the middle of the beasts, in the middle of the elders, where the Lion should be, stands a slain Lamb. Everything is focused on it. John sees the Lamb because the Lion prevailed as the Lamb. The Lion was found worthy because He was slain as the Lamb. The only way Jesus could be the Lion was to be the Lamb. The only way Jesus could conquer was to suffer.

Jesus was the Passover Lamb. He was slain in the place of sinners. But the slaying of the Lamb includes more than Jesus’ death on the cross. The slaying of the Lamb culminates in His death on the cross, but it also includes all the things He had to suffer on the way to the cross. Isaiah prophesied all He was to endure:

“He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised,

and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgement: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:3–12).

He suffered and He was slain. But John does not just see a slain Lamb; the Lamb is standing. The Lamb was dead but is now alive—a mystery. When an ani-

mal is killed, it can no longer stand; it has no life. But this Lamb that was slain is standing. The word for “standing” is active in contrast to the passive word for “slain.” The slain Lamb is alive.

How can this be? Because the slain Lamb is the Lord Jesus Christ; He is God Himself. Verse 6 continues to describe the Lamb. The Lamb has “seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.” Throughout Scripture, the horn is a symbol of power, and the number seven is symbolic of fullness or perfection. The Lamb has all power. He can do all things. He is omnipotent. Jesus says in John 10:17–18, “Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.” The Lamb has the power to lay down His life and take it; He can be slain and yet stand.

The Lamb not only has seven horns, but also “seven eyes.” The Lamb is not only all-powerful, but also all-knowing. The eyes represent knowledge, and seven, the number of perfection, is applied to the eyes as well. One of the main means for learning is by watching. When parents are trying to teach something, what do they usually say? They say, “Watch this” or “Look at me.” Imagine what you could learn if you could watch everything in the world, all over the world, at the same time! The seven eyes are another way of saying that the Lamb sees everything and knows everything.

Verse 6 continues. It specifies that these eyes are “the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth,” referring to Zechariah 3:9 and 4:10. Both passages refer to types of Christ and speak of seven eyes. “For who hath despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven; they are the eyes of the

LORD, which run to and fro through the whole earth.” The Spirits mentioned in conjunction with the eyes refer to, as the Puritan Thomas Goodwin put it, the “eyes of providence sent into the earth, by which he knows and sees all things.” The Lamb who was slain is the Lamb who can stand because He is God; He can do all things and He knows all things.

Do you know this mystery? Not the meaning of the words on this page, but the Lamb Himself. Do you know Him as the Suffering One who took the place of sinners? John cried out in the grip of his unworthiness, and the elder pointed him to the Lion, but he sees a Lamb.

Have you ever needed a Lion? You look at yourself, your feelings, your thoughts, or the struggles in your life: work, getting bills paid, keeping the farm going, a struggle with a particular child, or even getting all your homework done. You say, “Lord, I need a Lion to deliver me. I need a Lion to win the victory.” Sometimes we subtly focus on what we would have the Lord do and not on the Lord Himself. When you look to the Lion for the victory, do you see Him as the Lamb?

Is your focus on Him and not on yourself? Do you go to Him knowing He is worthy because He was slain? Because He is the Lord of history and He has done all things, you can be assured that, no matter what, He has your best interests in mind.

Believer, whom do you go to? Do you go to Christ and plead the promises? Do you plead on His person and on His work? Do you plead on the fact that He was slain? Do you plead on the fact that He stands? Do you plead on His eyes, and do you plead on His horns? You can trust that you will prevail because He has.

Perhaps you are concerned. You see your sin and you are afraid of the Lion. The only way you see the Lord is as a consuming fire. But when you look to Him and trust in Him, you will find a Lamb who was slain

for sin. He is slain but He stands. He stands with seven horns and seven eyes. He is very God of very God; He will accept you, not cast you out.

Perhaps all of this means nothing to you. You do not care about the Lord Jesus or what He has done. I warn you: He has prevailed, and you stand no chance against Him. If He is not your only hope, then you have no hope.

3. Jesus Christ is the Lord of history as the Lamb who opens the book.

We have seen the great need in heaven. The Lion has prevailed. In turning to see the Lion, John sees the Lamb. The Lamb is worthy, so He takes the book. In verse 7, we read, “And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne.” He takes the book from the right hand, the position of privilege, demonstrating that He is worthy and even equal to God the Father Himself.

The Lord Jesus Christ is now the Lord of all time and history, and all things are under His power and authority. In Matthew 28:18, we read that, upon completing His atoning work, Christ said, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.”

1 Corinthians 15:27 states, “For he hath put all things under his feet. But when he saith all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted, which did put all things under him.” All things in heaven and earth, including all things to come, are now His. By the victorious suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ, history can continue to unfold—and it unfolds as His story.

What is your response to the great work of the Lord of history? The last half of Revelation chapter 5 demonstrates what our response should be: all of heaven and earth should bow before the slain Lamb and worship Him. This worship has two aspects. The first is humility. Verse 8 states, “And when he had taken the book,

the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb.” The elect angels and the church bow in humble reverence before the slain Lamb. None of the beasts or elders calls for the attention of the Lamb. None is asking for recognition of his service. There are no congratulations offered. There is only self-abasing, humble bowing before Him who is worthy.

The second aspect of their worship is confessing the greatness of the Lamb and what He has done in song. In verse 9, we are told that they sang “a new song.” They sang in praise to the Lamb, praising Him by proclaiming what the Lamb has done to conquer as a Lion. First, they confess what He can do and what He has done: “Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain” (v. 9). Second, they confess the effects of what He has accomplished: “thou...hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth” (vv. 9–10). Third, all those in heaven confess the extent of His worthiness: “Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing” (v. 12). Finally, all those in heaven and earth give Him the praise He deserves: “Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever” (v. 13).

The only fitting response to Jesus Christ, the Lord of history who alone is the Lion who conquered, the Lamb who was slain, and Lord who opens the book, is to humbly worship Him and confess the greatness of who He is and what He has done. May the Lord Himself give us repentance for not honoring Him as He deserves and the desire and strength to bow before Him.

God's Great Reversal

Rev. Don Overbeek

Text: Isaiah 65:17-25

Entropy, a word we may not all know, is a reality we cannot deny. It refers to how things in our world, when left alone, tend to disorder. Marriages crumble much more easily than they are built, and aging slowly reduces our physical capability. Yet, with these realities filling our lives, Christians know that such degradation is not ultimate and insoluble. Greater than these problems are for our small lives and short existence is the God whose creation this is and before whom nothing is without perfect and final resolution.

Yet, as we struggle against these and other experiences, we are often prone to put great people of God on a pedestal as if they stood above and outside of actual reality. We tend to over-glorify people like Moses, David, Isaiah, and Paul, somehow thinking that things for them were just a bit better than for us. But we are corrected through the record of their glaring personal weaknesses and horrible sins. In addition, we are also shown what they looked for and saw by faith. They were always directed to look forward beyond the pale of their age dominated by sin's entropy to the age of God's intervention when He will set things back to order. However, this return to rightness isn't just a return to what once was; it is the higher and greater reality of what God had planned from the beginning.

Our text takes place in the times of Isaiah, when the scene was bleak. Things in the nation's religious life had gone from bad to worse and the surrounding countries were ready to be God's instruments of judgment. The first verse of the prophecy tells us when this was spoken—during the reign of four kings—from approximately 740 B.C. to at least 680 B.C. The theme

of the first 39 chapters of the book is widespread and overwhelming judgment and woe upon those who reject God. The last 27 chapters of Isaiah give the glorious hope of God's restoration through redemption performed by His Servant for His people. This work will usher in ultimate glory.

Isaiah 65:17–25 vividly pictures a new creation brought about by the sovereign and timely intervention of the Lord. With grandiose language, great progression, and glorious associations, Isaiah takes believers to the future age of which the coming of Christ is the beginning and the return of Christ will be its full realization. And what marks this age? Final reconciliation with God and an experiential communion initiated by God with His people, enjoyed in the context of a restored Paradise. Here are matters so great and profound as to raise us up to a new level of spiritual enjoyment in God so that the entropy in us and around us must gradually fall away and we may enjoy the One who never gives in to disorder but constantly renews those who enjoy communion with Him.

A reversal upon creation

In our text, we are immediately confronted with the wonder of a new creation! But, lest we rush ahead too fast, we need to stop and think of the connection with what precedes, indicated by the little word “for.” This small connective word shows the reason why “the former troubles are forgotten” and how “they are hid from mine [the LORD’S] eyes” (verse 16). In the preceding verses we read the narrow division between the godly servants of the LORD who will be abundantly blessed and the wicked idolaters who are forever cursed. To magnify the blessings of the righteous, Isaiah moves from former troubles to the wider view of the future glory that provides the ultimate picture of blessing. Our text is teaching us that we do not need to surrender to

the "old" ways of sin and servitude to Satan. Even as we are convicted of the reality and power of sin, God's Word brings the greater power of God to perfectly deal with our sin!

So God lifts up Isaiah's eyes and heart with the words, "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth." We clearly see the echoes of creation, but what is in focus here? Well, it is the same as the focus of the original creation, the express will of God to make Himself known. The eyes of faith are different from the natural eyes of sense that focus chiefly on the creation. Above and behind and through creation, we find the Creator and His glorious "I create." The verb is used only of God and draws our attention to the Creator. When God wants to reveal Himself; no one can stop Him, for nothing is greater than His sovereign initiative.

Further, the word "new" shows that the revelation is heightened to a superlative degree. God never just works chronologically. He always makes qualitative improvements through time, and Isaiah is using the language of total new creation to depict the level of cosmic development that God would sovereignly usher in. It would be like a young man many years ago anticipating a very nice horse-drawn carriage for his birthday. It would certainly be better than what he had used up until then, but imagine if his birthday comes and, instead of a carriage, he discovers a shiny new car in the driveway! This car is not just better than what he had before; it is an improvement (most would say) over the finest carriage. God is not just ushering the finest means of transportation, but the finest world ever!

Here Isaiah is standing on the threshold of this creative act. God is inaugurating it, and the former rebellion, idolatry, and iniquities will not be remembered. What preceded is encapsulated in the first verse: the people wanted nothing to do with God. Creation was abused (take note of the number of place names,

references to mountains, gardens, animals, etc.) and God was spurned times without number. The beauty of God's redeeming grace is found in His ability to take the crooked and perverse former things and make something new. The amazing thing is not that man would not remember the former, but that God would not remember it, though it was marked by revolt against Him. In this new creation, God is manifesting a heart that forgives and a posture that has accomplished reconciliation. If God can say this on a cosmic scale in creation, does that not of necessity include His posture towards His contrite people? More than likely, you struggle with your past—mistakes you made, habits you formed, destruction you caused. But here we see that God is so taken up with His “new” work, even as it may be taking place in you, that there is no room in His purview for bringing the “former” back to mind. After all, His new work dealt with the totality of believers' lives in a final way!

What will occupy the Lord's attention? It is His Jerusalem. Notice that the former was marked by the fall of Adam as the covenant head of all people, while the latter is marked by Jerusalem under the leadership of David's Son and including all of God's elect. The spotlight is on Jerusalem, the place where God's name was placed, the place where the people of God met with their King, the place where reconciliation ultimately was made—the the center of Palestine, the center of the world. The garden of Paradise was marred when an intruder came to spoil it, but the Jerusalem fortress created by God is impregnable and eternally safe.

But is Jerusalem just a place? No; Jerusalem symbolizes many things in the Bible, one of which is the rule that God has established there. This is shown by the height of the city itself and especially the establishment of David's throne there. Jerusalem is a picture of creation restored in obedience to her rightful King.

This is why there can be so much rejoicing and joy, because the wrongs have been righted and we catch a glimpse of creation returning to order from rebellion. It is like David dancing before the ark, knowing all that was portrayed in the re-entry of Jehovah as King into His city and His temple. No longer will the "voice of weeping" or the "voice of crying" be heard, for those are indicators of distress. Rather, there is God rejoicing as King, showing His delight in His "new" Jerusalem.

Now we need to ask how the Jerusalem image bridges the gap between the "former" creation and the "new heavens and new earth." And at the same time comes the personal application of how sinners today may be included in that new creation, the Jerusalem of God. The way that the Lord as King establishes rule of His creation and His people is not told to us, but we find a clue in Isaiah himself. He was the prophet sent by the heavenly court (Isa. 6) to kings in the former Jerusalem to declare this newness, a newness that he could not usher in, but God would. The Messiah as the Son of David, and the greatest King, who Himself as the Son of God was "first rank" (Col. 1:15) at creation, came embodying the new creation and making it a reality for those who trust in Him. This conflict of the former and new ages was resolved at Jerusalem, where tears would be shed as the messianic King bore the weight of the former age upon Him, right to the cross where forgiveness is merited and into the tomb where the former is buried. In the day of resurrection, the new creation is ushered in, with joy replacing weeping in the very city of Jerusalem. Now it is through the gospel message of the new creation in Christ and faith in Him that this creation is entered and enjoyed. As we see in 2 Corinthians 5:17, the beauty of being a Christian is not found in faith itself, but the work of God on which it is based!

A reversal of the curse

Verses 20–23 turn our attention to life in that new creation, described as “Jerusalem.” The main point to grasp here is that while the aspect of creation focuses our attention on God as King reestablishing His primacy and rule, these verses show how life will be in that kingdom viewed from the perspective of believers, the people included in the word “they.” When God does an objective work, the subjective experience of His people must change. How does it change? Isaiah highlights three aspects: longevity of life, satisfaction in labor, and the blessed line of people.

We have to remind ourselves how the sinful disruption of creation affected the experience of humanity. At the Fall, a right relationship with God was ruptured and therefore the right to life was lost; death became dominant in man’s experience. While life was given to be enjoyed eternally with God, sin brought death and decay and a downward slide in the length of human life. Genesis 6:3 restricts human life to 120 years from the 800-900 year average before the flood. Then to Moses’ words in Psalm 90:10, the days are further subtracted to “three score years and ten [70]; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore [80] years....” This trend continues to its lowest point, at the time of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the time of the birth of Christ, when infanticide further lowered the average lifespan, especially of males. Does not your life show marks of brevity and significant shortening?

Verse 20 supplies the answer of the Lord for this longevity problem created by the Fall. Admittedly, the words are hard to put together, but the general sense is captured by this paraphrase, “In that place there shall be no more an infant who lives but a few days, nor an old man who doesn’t live out his years. Those who die at 100 will be as youth [they had far more life to live], and the sinner who dies before a hundred is considered

accursed.” It is as if the Lord is saying that, unlike early in history, when believing Abel was killed young and unbelieving Cain was spared to live, the righteous will enjoy a full and satisfying life in the Jerusalem of the future, the place of the Lord, while the wicked will die under the curse, even if they live long.

We note a few things here. Firstly, death is still pictured. This death, though, has been changed and emptied of its dominating grip. At such a time there is the fullness of life, even with the reality of death not being totally exterminated. The guarantee that stands behind even the reality of death is that all past, present, and future wrongs shall be righted and righteousness shall reign. Secondly, this leads us to what the New Testament calls “eternal life.” This is not to be conceived merely as the time after Christ comes again, but also now, when a full and abundant life is available in Christ. This is true because the eternal kingdom, the Jerusalem of God is being built now. Therefore, if you are a believer, you have everlasting life; death, the devil, or anyone else cannot take it from you. Thirdly, for some time, even after the breaking in of this blessed life into human experience, there will be a “rubbing shoulders” with those who are sinfully resistant to the kingdom. They may taste something of outward, overflowing blessings, but they have no part in the experience of God’s grace. If you are enjoying life and holding out against God’s work of change, no matter how long you live or how wealthy you get, you are under God’s wrath and only receive your current blessings because of God’s overflowing goodness to His own people. There will come a time when even the outward blessings will be removed and your only portion will be unmitigated wrath as you bear the curse eternally.

In addition to the reversal of longevity, the Lord points us to a satisfaction in labor in verses 21–22. At the creation of man, God gave Adam a mandate that

follows from God's very own creative ability. Man was not to be a creator, for that is God's exclusive domain, but man would be a builder, one who multiplies, replenishes, and subdues (Gen. 1:27–28). This is carried out initially in Cain himself, who builds a city, and calls it Enoch after his son. This, along with the history of Israel, shows us the curse that abides over all the efforts of obedience to the cultural mandate. In Deuteronomy 28:30, we read Moses' declaration of the curse that would result from the disobedience of Israel, "Thou shalt build a house, and thou shalt not dwell therein: thou shalt plant a vineyard, and shalt not gather the grapes thereof" (see also Zeph. 1:13). Because of the sin of humanity, we are never permitted to totally enjoy what we accomplish in this world.

But in the reversal of the curse that the Lord is revealing to Isaiah, there will come a day when there will be satisfaction in labor. This satisfaction is pictured by resting in the houses they build and eating the fruit of their vineyards. Much of our culture gives evidence that man has no final rest in the world under the curse, for we go from place to place, thing to thing, religion to religion, hoping to find the elusive satisfaction. True satisfaction with labor is pictured in work performed from the perspective of the Jerusalem that God is building.

Then, too, there is a great divide. Some people will be left out from the blessings. This is in view in 22a, where other unbelieving people will not be allowed to pillage the people of God. Yes, while covenant breaking is a reality, there is some crossover; but there will come a point when a final separation will be made. God's people will enjoy the labor of their hands and be satisfied with rest, while the obstinate unbelievers will be without home and without food, without life itself. People outside of God's redemption must use the current time to not just get goods for themselves as they perish, but

to learn and love the God of grace and mercy, who gives them some of the overflowing abundance that He showers upon His people. They must repent and believe and take their place in the family of faith.

The final thing we read about satisfaction in labor is the foundation for it. It is pictured as a tree, showing lasting testimony and legacy. This would be a covenant reminder of the blessings that God gives to His people. Sometimes as my family walks through parks we see trees with plaques on the ground for who provided the funding for the tree. A small impact has been made through that gift, an impact that hopefully will last. Well, the legacy of God's people will last longer than any donated tree with its plaque. For their legacy stems from the electing purpose of God and leads back to Him whose purpose is sure. Their future is guaranteed because their past is governed by immutable decree.

The third aspect of the reversal of the curse is in the people themselves being called the "seed of the blessed of the LORD." One of the greatest results of the sin of man is not the short life, nor the difficulty and dissatisfaction in labor, but the double "seeds" that have resulted. There are two big families in the earth, which war against each other: the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. Both of these "seeds" came from Eve and both of these "seeds" exist today. The wonder of verse 23 is that our attention is focused on the "seed of the blessed of the LORD." As this Jerusalem is populated, believers may take great comfort from these words.

In these words there is the suggestion that the Lord is doing the spiritual begetting. The fountainhead of any life in this Jerusalem, and of any reversal of the curse, is the reception of life from the Lord Himself (see Psalm 87). The divine life is worked in hearts by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, as Christ explains it to Nicodemus in John 3. The Lord guarantees and

goes so far as to generate a posterity that are called His people. We see this in Abel and Seth and throughout the Word of God in the idea of the remnant. Your being of such a lineage as “begotten by the LORD” in a sense gives you a right to all the additional glories of the new creation of God.

There also seems to be a hint that the “blessed of the LORD” is not just a state of existence, but the name of a real Person—*the* Blessed of the Lord: the One who is God, and who was the Word of creation, whose days are eternal and whose power is unlimited. The seed is both One and many, and this One, who is peculiarly blessed of the LORD, is the divine Son incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ. Through faith, we receive the effects of a reversed curse because the “Blessed of the LORD” bore the curse on the cross. His days were cut off; He presumably built houses and yet had no place to rest His head; His days were marked by a tree—not as a memorial, but as the accursed death. This “Blessed of the LORD” is central to the program of God’s new creation; the most beautiful mark of a believing life is when we revolve around the same center as God. When our plans, passions, and purposes all take a Christ-exalting shape, then are we truly blessed.

The reversed curse concludes with the covenant hope for the future—there will be a full number of people in the city of God. This is indicated in the word “seed” and the phrase “and their offspring with them.” There is life in this line, not just because of the death that bore the curse, but because of the life that conquered the curse. There is not vanity or trouble but inextinguishable life that runs through the spiritual veins of all for whom He died, and so they will be brought to know and experience the life-changing grace purchased at such a dear price.

A reversal in communion

The culmination of the passage is indicated by the phrase “and it shall come to pass” in verse 24. With these words we are thrust outside of what we can easily describe and must be content for the blessed experience of the communion spoken of here. One of the great beauties of the Bible—and therefore of the Christian life—is the continual mystery that attends it. Too often, Christians live as though there were no remaining mysteries—as if we have it all figured out. But the beauty of true religion that comes from God is that the present mystery whets our appetite for future experience when the mysteries will be reconciled and the God of them eternally enjoyed. The believer must be filled with holy wonder as he or she reads these verses, just because it is so far beyond our current experience.

Man created as the image of God means that God could have closest communion with man. Yet, we know that humanity forfeited that great privilege through self-centered sin. This did not ultimately end God's desire for communion with His creatures; it raised it to another level. God's answer to our rebellion is not ultimate estrangement but repeatedly returning to us, like we read in verse 1, “I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not” or in verse 2, “I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people....” What grace of God, to seek and strive with men! Even in light of this, the complaint continues as in verse 12, “Because when I called, ye did not answer; when I spake, ye did not hear; but did evil before mine eyes, and did choose that wherein I delighted not.” Judgment comes to those who continually reject the Lord and spurn His grace. As we have seen in these verses, judgment never has the last word; it only heightens the glory of final redemptive success.

It is that final redemptive success of the Lord that is in view in verses 24–25, where the intimate commu-

nion between God and humanity extends to the animal realm, like a glorified Eden. We are not told when or how these things will be fulfilled, but that they will be. This doesn't surprise us, for the Lord does not reveal all His glorious purposes at once. The features of this communion demand our attention.

The first feature that verse 24 gives is the intense spirituality of this communion. There is a closeness between the Lord and His people that surpasses language. All separation has been overcome and there is holy converse that depends not on physical circumstances or constructs. We see something like this in seasoned marriages, where the spouses only have to look at each other to know what their mate is thinking. Such an example is far less profound, though, than vibrant communion with the living God. Every Christian lives by tastes of this intimacy with God, where the Spirit bears witness with our Spirit that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16) and yet the fullness and finality of face-to-face communion remains reserved for the "not yet."

We then face the wonderful question, "How can this be true?" It simply seems too good! It indicates that there will be such a full provision made that this communion is the only possible result. This provision is essentially the fullness of the Spirit that Adam forfeited but was perfectly received by Christ as the second Adam, out of whom believers receive the Holy Spirit. In Christ, this intimacy of God and man is found, and it is not only through His two natures but by His Spirit. Therefore, these words, though wonderfully beyond our experience, ought to be expected by God's redemptive provision. Even before His people call, He hears; the Spirit of Christ puts that call in their hearts and that same Spirit continues to indwell Christ at the Father's right hand. When the Spirit puts the call in the heart, the Father hears it. What boldness ought to mark our

prayers! Even more than that, how ought believers to pray always by holding this holy converse with God wherever we are. It is a new covenant privilege that we too rarely appreciate.

This communion is a two-sided, growing delight as God reveals more of Himself to His people and as His people behold and enjoy more of the majesty of their God. God is glorified through the use of means like prayer, but prayer is not the final step in a Christian's communion with the Lord—it is just the beginning! It leads to growth in appreciation and enjoyment of God who still gives Himself fully to each of His people. Let these thoughts not just evoke more prayer and praise, but maximize your enjoyment of the new creation that God has made real through Christ. Just as the Lord could regularly walk with Adam in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8), so believers have that privilege restored in the experience of the new creation.

Just to prove it and put the icing on the cake, so to speak, we see an Edenic scene portrayed in verse 25. This is the final and consummate enjoyment of covenant communion, prophesied already in Isaiah 11:6–9. Perfect harmony reigns because all forces of destruction are defeated. There will no longer be any predators, for the wolf and the lamb shall feed together. The wolf will not feed on the lamb, but they will be eating side by side. There will be no primacy, for the lion shall eat straw like the bullock; the king of the beasts is like the ox of the field. All will be equally under the Lord and in harmony with others. There remains no prospect for the serpent, for he receives the same pronouncement as that in Genesis 3:14: “dust thou shalt eat.” And there is no perishing at all, “they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain saith the LORD.” None shall be destroyed or hurt, for the communion and peace shall be restored to that which followed the original creation.

So we conclude on the highest possible note: not with

animals at peace and rest, but the certainty that comes from “saith the LORD.” When He acts, He speaks, and when He speaks, He will certainly act. What is our responsibility? We must simply “behold,” for there is nothing better than beholding God as our God—as His new creatures in His new creation through Jesus Christ.

Christ Forsaken!

Dr. Joel R. Beeke

Psalter 240:2, 5

Read Matthew 27:33-50

Psalter 230:1-6

Psalter 416:6-7

Psalter 4

Dear congregation,

With God's help, we wish to consider one of Scripture's most solemn and immense texts, Matthew 27:46, "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Our theme is *Christ Forsaken!*, which we will examine in three thoughts:

1. The profundity of His sufferings
2. The purpose that lay behind His sufferings
3. The love that pervaded His sufferings

The Profundity of Christ's Sufferings

It is twelve o'clock. Jesus has been on the cross for three pain-filled hours. Three times He has spoken from the cursed tree, focusing on the well-being of others: He has lovingly prayed for His enemies, promised salvation to a thief, and made arrangements for His mother's care. Many in the tumultuous crowd have scarcely heard the words Jesus has said. Many who, five days earlier, have waved palm branches before Him and cried, "Hosanna!" are now making abominable accusations against Christ.

Then, at noon, something unusual happens. Something quiets the noise and clamor at the place of execution. It suddenly becomes strangely dark at Calvary, and "over all the land." This darkness is no

natural phenomenon; it is more than a thunderstorm and more than an eclipse. By a miraculous act of Almighty God, midday becomes midnight.

This supernatural darkness, which lasts for three hours, is a symbol of God's judgment on sin. God is light and in Him is no darkness at all, Scripture tells us. The Bible often associates sin with darkness and holiness with light. So the physical darkness that covers Calvary signals a deeper and more fearsome darkness that Christ Himself has described as "outer darkness," or the darkness of hell, where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The sun withholds its light as thick, heavy darkness descends on Golgotha, and the great High Priest enters Golgotha's holy of holies. The curtain is drawn, excluding friends and enemies. The Son of God is left alone. At Christ's birth, the bright light of God's glory and a multitude of angels fill the heavens. When Christ dies, the heavens go black because God is forsaking His Son. It is night within Jesus, for the God of light is letting go of Him. God does not look upon His suffering Servant. Forsaken of God and forsaken of people, Jesus confronts a dark end.

In His first three hours on the cross, Jesus has suffered intense physical and internal pain; in His last three hours, He suffers such incredible internal pain that it induces darkness to descend on Calvary. From noon to 3:00 p.m. that Friday, the Lord Jesus Christ is cast out of God's presence into utter darkness. What the Savior endures in those final three hours on the cross defies our imagination. No filmmaker can begin to picture it.

A plague of darkness precedes the slaying of the Passover lamb in Exodus 12. Here on the cross, the great Passover Lamb is being sacrificed in a much more profound darkness. The thick darkness over the land is intensified in the darkness within the soul of Jesus

Christ. For three long hours, Christ wrestles with the powers of darkness. He is in the midst of natural darkness as spiritual darkness descends into the depths of His being. We read of no word during these three hours by Christ or anyone in the crowd around the cross. It is an awesome, eerie, unforgettable scene of silence.

Hear the silence and feel the darkness, then tell me that Jesus doesn't understand your darkness. He *does* understand. He is a Friend who can sympathize with your darkest moments, your deepest fears, your most indescribable agony. He comes alongside you when you cry out with tears, saying, "Heaven is silent!" His response is: "I understand; I have been there and I know what it is like. I can get you through this. Your weeping may endure for a night, but joy will come in the morning." When you walk in darkness, Jesus is there, for He has endured midnight at midday.

Christ has endured most of His physical suffering in silence. He has not responded to the spitting and scourging at Gabbatha; He has been silent as He has carried the cross, as He has been lifted on it, and as nails have torn at His flesh. But as He experiences the full brunt of His Father's wrath, Jesus cannot stay silent. Though invisible in the darkness, He cries out: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

This fourth word from the cross represents the nadir, the lowest point, of Jesus' sufferings. Here Jesus descends into the essence of hell in the most extreme suffering ever experienced. It is a time of incredible destiny and density—a time so compacted, so infinite, so horrendous as to be incomprehensible and seemingly unsustainable. To begin to grasp a little of the profundity of this amazing cry from the cross, let us look at five things that this word from the cross do not reveal, then at four things that it does reveal.

First, Jesus' cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?," does not in any way *diminish His deity*.

Jesus does not cease being God before, during, or after this. He was and is God and man.

Second, Jesus' cry does not *divide His human nature from His divine person*. His person is not split so that the union between His natures is broken. These two—God and man—never cease to be united. What is more, Christ does not experience desertion in His divine nature, but in His human nature. Nor is this desertion mutual. The Father temporarily deserts Christ, but Christ does not desert His Father.

Third, Jesus' cry does not *destroy the Trinity*. It does not reveal a crack in the Trinity so that the Father and Son fall apart. God the Father cannot forsake His Son as God. Father and Son are still one in their being and one in all their attributes. The three Persons have not become two Persons. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit remain three Persons in one Godhead, but the awesome fellowship of delight has been temporarily severed between the Father and His Son, the God-man. Thomas Goodwin writes, "The Godhead was not separated, though the operation of comfort from the Godhead was sequestered."

Fourth, Jesus' cry does not *detach Him from the Holy Spirit*. He does not cease to be filled with the Holy Spirit without measure. The Son lacks the comforts of the Spirit, but He does not lose the holiness of the Spirit. The Spirit is still in Him without measure.

Finally, Jesus' cry does not cause Him to *disavow His mission*. Both the Father and Son have known from all eternity that Jesus will become the Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world. Acts 15:18 says, "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world." Jesus has been walking with destiny to this very moment, and the hour of laying down His life has finally come. Now He will accomplish the redemption of sinners by being made a sacrifice for their sin.

It is unthinkable that the Son of God might question what is happening on the cross or be perplexed about why His Father's loving presence departs. Jesus has refused wine mixed with myrrh at the very start of crucifixion so that He will be alert to the end. All His feelings serve this redemptive end.

Taken collectively, these five principles teach us that even when—indeed, *especially* when—Christ is deserted by His Father, we must bow down and worship Christ. If Christ had ceased to be God when His Father left Him, our worship of the Son would be idolatry, for we would be worshiping a mere creature. Surely, if we are Christians, *the ultimate reason* for worship is the moment when we hear Jesus cry out to God. Instinctively, we feel the need to fall down in worship and say, “My Lord and my God!”

Though we can scarcely begin to grasp what being forsaken by God means for Jesus, we know that it is more awful than we can imagine. And we can stammer out at least four things that these words from the cross do mean.

First, Jesus is expressing the *agony of unanswered supplication*. The words Jesus says echo what is said in Psalm 22:1–2, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent.” Precisely what Jesus is praying for here is not exactly clear. Is He once more asking for the cup of suffering to pass? Is He begging for a token of His Father's light—a smile or benediction? Whatever it is, He receives no answer except the echo of His own voice and the cruel taunts of hell. The heavens are as brass before Him.

Unanswered, Jesus feels forgotten of God though He is not really forgotten. You too, dear believer, know a little of that sorrow. And yet, in your most “forgotten

moments,” you are not truly forgotten by God either. A mother would sooner forget her sick, sucking child than your Father in heaven, for the forgotten Savior’s sake, would forget you (Isa. 49:14–17).

Second, Jesus is expressing *the agony of unbearable stress*. Stress and distress so overwhelm Jesus that He cries with a loud voice, the kind of “roaring” mentioned in Psalm 22. The famous painting titled “The Scream” depicts a person with a huge mouth uttering an awful scream. It represents humanity under so much stress that it utters a primal scream. But even this horrific figure pales in comparison to the roaring cry of the Lord Jesus. His cry pierces the darkness. It is like the perpetual shriek of those who are cast away forever. It is the roar of desperate agony without rebellion. John Flavel writes, “It is as much as if Christ had said, O my God, no words can express my anguish: I will not speak, but roar, howl out my complaint; pour it out in volleys of groans: I roar as a lion.” It is the cry that is uttered in hell when the wrath of God overwhelms the damned. This cry is heart-piercing, heaven-piercing, and hell-piercing. What agony!

Children, how do you feel when you fall and hurt yourself, then run to your father for help, only to find that your father is not there? You are so anxious that you begin to scream, “Dad, Dad, where are you? My dad is gone!” That anxiety is nothing compared to Jesus’ excruciating distress in the absence of His Father. What do the angels think when they hear Jesus cry and witness the Father’s silence as He turns His back on His own beloved Son?

In this moment, as in none other, the Son knows the full measure of His Father’s wrath. That anger deluges the Son with no restraint. All of divine justice crashes upon Him, wave after wave. Never has He been such an object of wrath!

Yet, at the same time, the Son is the supreme object

of His Father's pleasure. The Father loves His Son because His Son lays down His life for His enemies. Never has the Father approved and admired His Son so much, though the Son temporarily feels no comfort of it.

If you are not a believer, does this cry of Jesus not frighten you? Does not this cry of hell disturb you and make you tremble? Jesus' words about being forsaken by God will be your words if you remain unrepentant. If you do not believe, you will experience unbearable stress, wrath, abandonment, forsakenness—not for three hours, but forever. Do you not need this Savior for your soul? Will you not embrace Him, believe in Him, trust in Him, and be saved?

Third, Jesus is expressing the *agony of unmitigated sin*. All the sins of the elect of all ages, and the hell that they deserve for eternity, are laid upon Christ on the cross. Without the support of His Deity, Jesus could never have sustained the burden. Because His Deity and humanity are combined in one infinite Person, His sufferings carry infinite value in the presence of an infinitely holy God. That is how Christ can bear our justly deserved eternal hell in such a short time.

I once saw a picture of a man standing in front of the multistoried Sears Tower in Chicago. He held two large boulders in his hands. The caption beneath the picture said that some stars are so dense in weight compared to their size that the two boulders the man held could weigh as much as the Sears Tower. That is a faint suggestion of how God compresses on His Son all the agonies of sin in a short period of time.

Jesus' cry includes such a profound sense of sin that, temporarily, His sense of Sonship seems to recede. That does not mean, of course, that Jesus doubts His own divine Sonship or loses a sense of it altogether. That would amount to a failure to receive in faith the Scripture's testimony about His very identity. Jesus is fully conscious of His divine identity and often cites

Scriptures that testify to it. So it would not be compatible with Jesus' impeccable faith in the Word of God to think that He doubted His divine identity.

Let me explain. Though Christ has a divine consciousness and a human consciousness, He has only one self-consciousness that belongs to His divine Person. His divine personhood is the foundation on which His theanthropic constitution is erected. Though He experiences change and development in His human consciousness so that He can pass into deeper sorrow when He enters Gethsemane, Jesus' self-consciousness never changes because it was an aspect of His personhood, and that personhood is divine.

That being the case, how can He cease to be conscious of Himself in His identity as the eternal Son of the Father? Would that not suggest a self-consciousness seated in His humanity rather than in His divine personhood? In His human mind, Jesus is conscious of human experience, and, in His divine mind, He is conscious of realities that His human mind cannot comprehend. But when He reflects on His individual identity, Jesus at all times knows but one self, the self who is the I Am That I Am, who is with the Father before the creation of the world, and who is sent by the Father to come into the world as a man.

Nevertheless, in these moments, a sense of sin dominates Jesus' consciousness to a frightening degree. In Gethsemane and in the first and last words on the cross, Jesus has called on God as His Father. But now He cries, "Eli, eli," or "Eloi, eloi"—"my God, my God." He is aware of God: the goodness of God, the justice and holiness of God. But that awful moment, in His self-image, He feels sin more intensely than His Sonship, though the Sonship is by no means obliterated.

He is feeling your and my sin, dear believer. Paul says that God the Father "made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). In His self-image,

Jesus feels at this moment not so much that He is the Beloved in whom God is well-pleased, but rather that He is the cursed one who is vile, foul, and repulsive. That is the essence of what God thinks of sin—the essence of the price the God-man has to pay for sin.

Yet, in the midst of this agony, Jesus exercises unassailable faith. He cries, “Eli, Eli” (which is Hebrew), or “Eloi, Eloi” (which is Aramaic)—the *El* meaning “strong one.” His feelings are saying, “No God,” but His faith says, “*My* God.” His feelings are saying, “No strength, no strong one,” but His faith says, “*My* strong One.” He is appealing to the One who has always supported Him in His troubles. His feelings are saying, “You have been left alone,” yet His faith says, “No matter what my feelings tell me, or what providence tells me, or what taunts are thrown in my face, He is my Lord and my God.” Calvin says of Christ in this moment, “Still in His heart faith remained firm, by which He beheld the presence of God, of whose absence He complains.”

In these words, “Eli, Eli,” Jesus exemplifies how we must abandon our feelings when our feelings say, “God has abandoned me.” Too often as Christians and as pastors we are governed by our feelings rather than our faith. We need to model for others how to live by faith in the midst of our darkest hours and our deepest trials. At such times, people are watching us more closely than ever to see how our faith holds up under suffering.

Then, too, we see Christ’s faith in the question “Why hast thou forsaken me?” Jesus is not asking this question in a spirit of boldness or impudence or rebellion. Nor is He asking with a sense of puzzlement, as if wondering, “What am I doing here?” Rather, Jesus is asking “Why?” in the spirit of submissive faith. He is asking the Father of heaven to make known in a vivid way why God is abandoning Him. He knows why, but

He wants the reasons to be stated again so that He can hold onto them for sustenance in these hours of darkness. He is saying, "Father, remind Me why this is necessary. Oh, yes, it is necessary for Me to be God-forsaken so that God-forsakers may know union with God. And now, look at the end—is it not glorious?" This is what the Lord is doing; He is asking in faith that His human nature might be strengthened as He is reminded of the reasons for His suffering and the end to which they serve. Here again is a wonderful example for us to follow.

Finally, Jesus is expressing here the *agony of unassisted solitariness*. Jesus is asking His Father, "Why hast thou forsaken, deserted, and abandoned me?" Before coming to earth, Jesus has been the eternal Son of God in heaven. The Father's love has been lavished generously and continuously upon Him. As Proverbs 8 says, "I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him."

Jesus also has experienced His Father's love on earth. Jesus has known continuously the Father's love and support and nearness. He has felt one with the Father. There never has been a sweeter Father, and there never has been a more loving Son. They have gone up from Bethlehem to Calvary together, like Abraham and Isaac going up the mount in Genesis 22. In such moments of trouble and sorrow, God has sent help. In John 12, the Father has affirmed the Son, saying, "This is my beloved Son." In the Garden of Gethsemane, God has sent an angel to strengthen His Son.

But now, in His hour of greatest need, Christ experiences a pain unlike anything He has ever experienced: His Father's abandonment. When Jesus most needs encouragement, no voice cries from heaven, "This is my beloved Son." When He most needs reassurance, no one says, "I am well pleased." No dove descends from heaven to symbolize peace; no angel is

sent to strengthen Him; no “well done, thou good and faithful servant” resounds in His ears. He is in a far country, a strange country, hanging in the naked flame of His Father’s wrath. The women who have supported Him so often are silent. The disciples, cowardly and terrified, are far away. Feeling disowned by all, Jesus walks the way of suffering alone in pitch-black darkness. Not one beam of sunlight is permitted to shine on Him. God is present only in displeasure, bearing down upon Christ in anger. Instead of love, there is wrath. Instead of affection, there is coldness. Instead of support, there is opposition. Instead of nearness, there is distance for three long, agonizing hours. The Son’s cries do not bring the Father back. There is no change in the Father’s demeanor until He is so far away that He eventually disappears. The Son cries out one last time, “My God—why?” That is what we have here. The Son is pursuing the Father as He distances Himself even further. There is an indescribable pursuit going on here, and yet the Father purposefully retreats. No amount of pursuing will catch up with the Father, and eventually there is nothing left but abandonment. Jesus is alone. Deserted. Forsaken.

Don’t misunderstand. Jesus does not pity Himself. He does not cry out with the rich man, “I am tormented in this flame.” But Jesus cries out for God.

Every detail of this abandonment shouts to you and me, “This is what God thinks of your and my sin!” Every detail declares the irrationality, the heinousness, the dread character of sin.

The fourth word Jesus utters from the cross takes our breath away. We can understand how David can utter this heart-rending cry in Psalm 22, but we find it impossible to understand how those same words can be uttered by Jesus Christ, the Son of God. How can He endure unanswered prayer, the fading of filial consciousness, and then the abandonment of His Father,

when He too is God of God? How can God forsake Christ as though He is Cain and not Christ? How can God the Father forsake God the Son?

Martin Luther exclaimed, “God forsaken of God! Who can comprehend it?” What this abandonment meant for Christ cannot be adequately explained, even by Christ Himself. Although He uttered these words in human language, they reflect an experience of which human beings are strangers. No son of Adam has ever gone through what Christ endured. Many people have felt forsaken of God, but no human being, not even reprobates, are completely forsaken by God while still in this life.

Outside an emergency room in a California hospital is a drop-off box for unwanted babies. The thought of abandoning one’s baby like dropping mail in a mailbox makes us shudder. Yet, when believers feel forsaken, it is like that: a feeling that does not correspond with reality. They lose the sense of God’s presence, but not this presence itself. With Christ this loss was both feeling and fact. He felt forsaken because He was forsaken. He endured the essence of abandonment; believers endure only the shadows of it, even though those shadows can be so fearsome.

The Purpose that Lay Behind Christ’s Sufferings

Why was Christ forsaken by God? We cannot hope to find a completely satisfying answer to this question. If even Christ Himself asked, “Why?” and received no answer, how shall we find a solution to this terrible darkness, this appalling situation, this unfathomable depth of suffering?

But Scripture does not leave us completely ignorant of why Christ was forsaken. Isaiah 53 offers part of the answer by telling us in verse 10, “It pleased the LORD to bruise him.” In His love for this evil world, God the Father offered up His own Son.

But why? Why did God deal this way with His own divine Son, whom He loved? Why did God bruise Him and place Him under His own wrath and curse? Christ was sinless; He was divine; yet He was accursed by God. Why? There are only four possible explanations of such actions of God the Father.

The first possibility is *capriciousness*—that the Father, out of a simple change of mind, anathematized His Son. Such an answer, of course, is unthinkable. God could never bruise and desert His Son out of mere arbitrary sovereignty. He knows no mood changes. He is not capricious. His love is steady; it is *agape* love.

The second possibility is that God the Father bruised His Son out of *malice*—that Jehovah crushed and bruised and extinguished the life of His own Son because of the evil that was part of His nature. This is also unthinkable, for it would be criminal on the part of God. If you saw a father bruising and murdering his son, you would not conclude that this father loved his son, but quite the contrary. Yet many who have no understanding of the atonement stand before the cross and foolishly say, “This is only proof of the love of God.”

The third possibility is *didactic*—that the Father wanted to teach the Son profound lessons about suffering so He laid harsh judgment, especially the judgment of desertion, upon Him. This approach is drawn from how God treats His people at times by bruising them with painful desertions. He appears to leave His people from time to time, though He doesn't actually do so, just as He never actually left Jesus. The Christian can have a sense of God's presence sometimes, but at other times have no sense of it.

Sometimes God withdraws His presence as a disciplinary measure because we have offended Him. Sometimes He withdraws Himself as a precautionary measure. He sees us heading into dangerous territory,

and He withdraws to make us aware of the direction we are heading. Sometimes He withdraws as a test, not because we have done wrong, but just to ask, “Will you stay with me if I take away the sense of My presence with you?”

But God had no reason to teach His Son such lessons. His Son was already perfect. The Father had no need to bruise His Son as a test, a discipline, or a precaution.

Finally, the Father’s real cause of bruising His Son is *penal*. That is, the source of the sufferings of Jesus is the righteousness of God. The righteousness of God demands that sin be punished. The Father’s bruising was judicial wrath. It was a just infliction of punishment for the sin that Christ carried for His people.

The logic of this judicial substitution is clearly stated in 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” The logic of Calvary is that Christ was made sin for us. He died for us; He bore our sin; He was made accursed for us; He gave His life a ransom for many. When all the anomalies and mysteries of salvation pile on top of one another, this little word *for* demolishes them all. In this *for*, darkness is illuminated; this small word unites Jesus Christ and sinners. In other words, there is only one thing that can explain why God inflicted punishment on His own Son, and that is that His Son stood in an intimate connection with sin and sinners. If Christ did not connect with sin and sinners, then Calvary was the darkest moment this world has ever known. But we are joined with Christ to sin and to sinners by the word *for!*

So in what sense was Christ *for* His people? First of all, Christ was acting on behalf of His people for their benefit. He was acting as their representative; He was acting in their interest. Christ is the Representative, the Advocate, the One who acts in the place of His

people. He intercedes for His people, pleads for them, and looks after their interests. But Jesus Christ is more than a representative.

Second, He suffered on behalf of His clients. He is not only the Priest interceding and pleading for His people, but He became the sacrifice in their place. He not only acts for the client, but He assumes the liabilities and responsibilities of the client.

As our substitute, Jesus bore our sin in our place and obeyed the law in our place so that God's justice can be satisfied and that God can be the justifier of those who believe in Jesus (Rom. 3:26). As our substitute, Christ assumed the guilt of His people and justified God in treating Him as His people deserve to be treated on account of their sin.

Dear believer, do you understand how Christ is anathema because He is your substitute? Because He is your sin, God bruised His Son and did not spare Him. He was made a curse for you to redeem you from the curse. He is your condemnation so that there is no condemnation for you. He is the Son of God crucified, Son of God anathema, Son of God desolate, Son of God forsaken, because He is the Son of man who must suffer many things. And that "must" is not rooted in human conventions nor in theological contrivances, but in the great central truth that God delights in mercy (Mic. 7:18) and therefore is in the business of saving sinners.

God loves to forgive sin. He loves to multiply pardon and to make it abound. But He condones nothing. God Himself must bear the sin. The God who forgives, who bears, and who exacts is the God who demands atonement. But wonder of wonders, the God who provides the atonement became the atonement. God is the Lamb. God has found the Lamb in His own flock, in His own bosom. This, surely, is the greatest reality in the Christian faith: that Jesus Christ became the sacrifice, the scapegoat.

No one at the foot of the cross could answer Christ's profound question. Even the angels had no answer. But in Psalm 22:3, Jesus answers His own question: "But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel." Why did God forsake Jesus? Because God is holy. God's love is a pure, sin-hating love. As Habakkuk says, "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look upon iniquity" (1:13). This was also true at the cross. God could not behold evil, even when that evil was found on His own Son. He could not look upon the iniquity that His all-seeing eye detected on Christ.

As far as any personal sins were concerned, Jesus had none. But as the representative of sinners, He bore much sin. When He took on Himself His people's sins, God treated Him as sin-bearer, holding Him responsible for the payment of their sin. That is why God forsook Jesus. God the Judge severed connections with His Son in His human nature.

Christ also received the wages of sin, which is death. Death means more than physical death; it also involves spiritual and eternal death, the complete separation between God and man. Adam brought that death upon himself and his descendants. So Christ, having taken Adam's sin upon Himself, also had to bear Adam's punishment. He descended into hell, the place of total loneliness and abandonment, where He cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

The answer to that question is: "Thou art holy, Thou art just in demanding satisfaction for sin at My hand. I know that I must answer for all the sins of My people. Therefore I can but justify Thee, O my God. Let Thy sword awake against the Man that is Thy fellow!" (cf. Zech. 13:7).

Christ's penal suffering, therefore, is vicarious—that is, He suffered on our behalf, dear believers. He did not simply share our forsakenness or take the brunt of it, but He saved us from it. He endured it

for us, not *with* us. You, dear believer, are immune to condemnation (Rom. 8:1) and to God's anathema (Gal. 3:13) because Christ bore it for you in that outer darkness. As interceding High Priest, Christ sympathizes with you, but what Golgotha secured for you was immunity rather than sympathy.

Because Christ died on the tree, there is no longer the slightest need for one grain of penal suffering to be visited on any of His people. He endured all the torments and relational distance from God that we deserve as sinners. The Savior was once abandoned for me so I shall never be abandoned. "Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). Golgotha will achieve all that God intended it to accomplish. Every lost sheep will be brought home to God.

This, then, is the only explanation for the three hours of darkness and for the roar of dereliction. God's people still experience the confirmation of this truth today when the Holy Spirit brings them to the cross in dreadful darkness, before the tribunal of the Judge of heaven and earth, only for them to experience, as the darkness subsides, that they are not consumed for Christ's sake. They come out of the darkness, confessing, "Because Immanuel has descended into the lowest hell for us, God is with us in the darkness, under the darkness, through the darkness—and we are not consumed!"

The Love that Pervaded Christ's Sufferings

I leave you with three applications relating to the Triune God's love in Christ's forsakenness.

First, Christ's being forsaken by God reveals the stupendous *love of Christ*. If Samuel Rutherford could say, "God incarnate is nothing but love covered with flesh," how much more vivid is Christ's love displayed in His cry of dereliction. "My God, my God, why hast

thou forsaken me?” was the cry of the incarnate God whose soul was sinking ever deeper into the bottomless pit of divine wrath. Believers cannot possibly fathom the love of the One who saved them from perdition. As one hymn writer put it:

*But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed,
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord
passed through,
Ere He found His sheep that was lost.*

As followers of Christ, Christians can expect suffering and persecution. Paul writes, “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). In Philippians 2:5–8, the apostle tells us to let the mind of Christ Jesus dwell in us. The Philippians were claiming their own rights rather than surrendering them; they wanted to be praised for the service they gave the Lord. They wanted their gifts to be acknowledged and honored. Paul responds, “If you are complaining that you are not being honored for what you do, look to the Lord of glory. Though He was God, He did not grasp at equality with God. Jesus did not insist on coming to this earth in all His regalia. He did not protect His dignity by refusing to be born in a stable.” Paul cautions the Philippians—and us—to abandon all pretensions of glory.

Is Christ’s mind in you, dear friend? What practical, profound teaching lies in the fourth word Jesus spoke from the cross! If we worship Jesus, we will relinquish every form of unresolved bitterness against anyone. How can we nurse bitterness against someone who treats us far less ill than we have treated the Lord of glory? Let us abandon our petty rights, our mundane complaints, at the foot of the cross. Let us quit trivializing. How do we dare to trivialize at the foot of the cross?

Second, Christ’s being forsaken by God reveals the

stupendous *love of the Father*. You ask, “Where is the love? There seems to be nothing but wrath here!” Look again and remember John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.” True, God had to turn His face away from Jesus because He found sin on Him. But this was all according to His plan. Remember, Jesus was made sin by God so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. Jesus was forsaken that we might be accepted of God and never be forsaken of Him.

In the gospel, the Father loves sinners lavishly. He gives everything He has and holds nothing back. When the Father gave His only Son, His bosom Friend from eternity, He took the best He had and gave Him for the worst He could find—sinners like you and me—asking His Son to experience the worst imaginable humiliation and suffering. He spared not His own Son but gave the supreme commitment of His heart.

Christ’s forsakenness by the Father makes plain that the Father held nothing in reserve but was extravagant in His overflowing love to sinners who were at enmity with Him. Dear believer, the fourth word from the cross preaches God’s unchangeable love for you. You are caught up in a love that has broken down all the prejudices of your evil mind and heart. That love has brought you into its own domain and caused you to swim in its infinity. The love of the Father flows from His very heart and being. Who can stop such love? No one has ever loved this way. And this love is made transparent at the cross in the cry of dereliction. Amazing grace! God is willing to turn a deaf ear to His Son’s agony to listen to your needs as a poor sinner.

Reverently speaking, such extravagant love appears to be almost foolish. When we learn how sinful we are, we are prone to cry out, “O God, how foolish Thou art to love such a creature as I am! Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man.” The wisdom of men is

foolishness with God, Paul says, but “the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor. 1:25). The foolishness of God’s amazing love is incomprehensible to us. Had others treated us the way we treated God, we would offer them no hope, no mercy, no forgiveness. We would refuse to cast our pearls before such swine, but God put the Pearl of great price in the pathway of the likes of us—wretched, sinful swine. In His infinite wisdom, God decided to bring glory to Himself and the Son of His love by making His Son the Mediator and Savior of a great multitude that no man can number.

Finally, Christ’s being forsaken by God reveals the stupendous *love of the Spirit*. After Christ drank the cup of His Father’s wrath, Mark 15:37–39 tells us that three veils were rent. The Father tore the veil in the temple (v. 38), the Son tore the veil of His flesh (v. 37), and the Holy Spirit tore the veil of the human heart (v. 39). The Spirit so convinced a centurion of the true identity of Jesus that he could not help crying out in the midst of a Christ-despising crowd, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (v. 39). The Holy Spirit used Christ’s last words and His loud cry of victory in death to persuade the centurion that Jesus Christ was the Messiah.

The Spirit still shows His incredible love in working patiently yet irresistibly in the hearts of sinners, applying to us the wonderful truths of the cross. He lovingly and persuasively shows us that Christ was forsaken of the Father that we might never be forsaken of the Triune God. He convinces us that all our sufferings, including feeling forsaken, are the fruit of merely walking in His shadow and are a far cry from the reality of forsakenness that Christ endured. In response, our hearts so overflow with love that we cry out, “We love him, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

If you are a believer, meditate on this love the next

time you feel forsaken of God. Think of what your Savior experienced. No matter how terrible your affliction is, remember that Jesus has been there before you so He understands your feelings. He can sympathize with your fears and anxieties, for He, too, has experienced them. Do not conclude that because you feel forsaken you cannot be a child of God.

A minister was standing by the deathbed of one of his members who suffered from deep depression. The pastor tried to find something to say that might comfort this man who had given evidence of being a Christian. But no matter what he said, the reply was, "It's no use." Suddenly the pastor said, "What became of that Man who died whom God did really forsake? Where is He now?" The dying man clung to that thought and said, "He is in glory, and I shall be with Him where He is!" Light finally came to this dying man.

In Christ's cry of dereliction, there is true hope for discouraged believers. If you feel abandoned and forsaken and wonder where God is, take heart. Your feeling of spiritual abandonment is only a feeling. It is not a fact. Flee to the once-forsaken but never-forsaking Savior, cast yourself upon Him, and you will experience the truth of Hebrews 13:5, best translated as "He will never, no never, no never forsake you."

Praise be to God, we will not be abandoned because Christ has suffered that abandonment for us. We can look into the beautiful face of Jehovah in heaven and say, "My Father," and He responds: "My child, I cannot leave you or forsake you. You are too precious to Me because the Lamb of God has made you Mine forever." Experiencing this, we can say, "I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

We can feel sorry for needy children of God who are thirsting for God and His communion, but at the

same time we can rejoice because such people will not perish. They will see God's gracious countenance. But we must be gravely concerned about the self-deceived who profess to know the Lord and yet do not have close communion with Him and who do not seem to know the difference between His presence and His absence. What else can this mean than that they are still strangers to God and His grace?

My friend, if you can live without a sense of the Lord's presence and are satisfied with mere outward Christianity, you are still lost in your sins. The wrath of almighty God rests on you. If you die like that, you will be forever where Christ was in essence for those three terrible hours on the cross. Hell is utter forsakenness by the favorable presence of God.

Whether you are self-deceived or knowingly unsaved, the fourth word from the cross warns you to flee from the wrath to come. You must be born again. Repent of your sin, believe in Christ alone for salvation, and submit to the Savior's lordship with your entire being. Do not rest until you, too, believe in Him who was forsaken in wrath that you might be accepted in mercy. Receive the admonition of Hebrews 2:2-3: "For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?" Amen.