

God Forsaken For Our Sake

Mark 15:34

By [Bryn MacPhail](#)

Arguably, the most startling words to ever come out of the mouth of Jesus were uttered as He hung dying on the cross, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (15:34).

The Reformer, Martin Luther, commenting on this, once said, ‘God forsaken by God, who can understand that?’

As we engage this single verse of Scripture this morning, we do so in humble recognition that we will never fully appreciate what it meant for Jesus to be forsaken by God on the cross.

Yet, we engage this verse nonetheless, because we believe that it has been purposely included for our edification and instruction. My prayer is that we can, in some measure, understand how Jesus being forsaken by God on the cross was essential to our gaining salvation.

Now, admittedly, there are some who would argue that the Father did, at no point, forsake Jesus on the cross. Some would argue that Jesus was simply reciting the beginning of Psalm 22 in order that we might reflect on the entire Psalm—a Psalm that ends with victory and assurance.

But, as one commentator put it, “(this explanation) fails to meet the exact circumstances of the story, (nor does it) match the mood of Mark’s gospel throughout” (English, *The Message of Mark*, 234). Even if we concede that Jesus had Psalm 22 in mind, it would be imprudent to narrow our interpretation of Jesus’ cry of dereliction, and to treat it merely as another teaching moment.

In the Reformed tradition, we maintain that Jesus *was* forsaken by the Father on the cross. We maintain that when Jesus cried, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”, He did not simply *feel* forsaken, He *was* forsaken—He was forsaken on our behalf. In theological circles, we have come to regard this as ‘Penal Substitution’.

To my distress, I recently heard a colleague say, ‘Penal substitution is not the Gospel’. I would maintain, however, that penal substitution is at the heart of the Christian gospel.

For some, theological phrases like ‘penal substitution’ go right over our head, and we wonder whether such phrases are ultimately important. To that, I answer with a resounding ‘Yes!’ If we are to appreciate the richness of the Christian gospel, it is necessary for us to understand this vital component of the gospel message.

Penal relates to the punishment, or the penalty, that rightly belongs to sinful humanity. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they, along with all of their posterity fell under the penalty of sin. This penalty is summarized in *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, which states, ‘Every sin . . . bring(s) guilt upon the sinner, whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal.’

In other words, humanity, left to our own, is in big, big, trouble. Adding to the bad news is the fact that we are incapable of reversing the penalty for our sin. No amount of trying to be a ‘good person’ fixes our sin problem. What happens instead is that we compound our trouble through our blatant, and persistent, disregard for the law of God.

With this being the case, we ask, ‘What hope is there for humanity? How is it possible for sinful humanity to be reconciled to a most holy God?’

Reconciliation with God is possible only through a special kind of mediator. This mediator must, first of all, be holy, in order to stand before God. And secondly, the mediator must be human, in order to properly represent us. And so, in Jesus, we have the perfect mediator—as the Son of God, He is capable of perfectly obeying the law. And, as man, He is capable of suitably representing humanity.

The question that remains is: How does Jesus represent us? And, the answer is that *Jesus represents us by acting as our substitute*.

When we say Jesus is our *penal substitute*, we are confessing that *what Jesus was doing on the cross was He was bearing sin in our place*. Jesus was suffering the punishment, He was bearing the penalty, for our sins.

Author, John MacArthur, says it well when he writes, “God was punishing His own Son as if He had committed every wicked deed done by every sinner who would ever believe” (MacArthur, *The Murder of Jesus*, 219).

The theory of penal substitution may not delineate every aspect of the Christian gospel, yet, we must nonetheless confess that: *The gospel minus penal substitution is no gospel at all*.

We must also be sure to note that penal substitution is not the invention of Reformed theologians. Penal substitution is a persistent theme found in Holy Scripture.

We see penal substitution in its earliest form in Leviticus (chapter 16) as bulls, goats, and lambs are sacrificed as offerings for the sins of the people.

We also see penal substitution foreshadowed in the well-known passage of Isaiah, chapter 53, "He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; *the chastening* for our well being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed" (Isa. 53:5).

In the New Testament, Paul speaks of the substitutionary nature of Christ's atonement when he writes to the Galatians, "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, *having become a curse for us*" (Gal. 3:13). And to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "(God) made Him who knew no sin to *be sin for us*, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2Cor. 5:21).

Scripture compels us; if we are to talk about atonement, we must necessarily talk about substitution. When we talk about what constitutes the gospel, we must include the substitution of Christ for helpless sinners whereby Christ is made to endure the God-forsakenness that should have been ours.

It seems to me, that this aspect of atonement is too often overlooked. Too often we focus on the physical brutality that Jesus endured to the exclusion of the spiritual torment He endured on our behalf.

Clearly, what the Christian Church needs to recover is the notion that *Jesus forsaken by God for our sake is at the heart of the gospel*. And though, I would never want to diminish the physical agony that Christ endured at Calvary, surely it was the anticipation of, and the experience of, being forsaken by the Father that was most tortuous for Jesus.

Think back to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus had prayed, "Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me." Was Jesus praying for simply an exemption from His impending physical demise? Or was He anticipating something more dreadful? Was it the consideration of His physical demise that caused Him to sweat drops of blood (Lk. 22:44), or was there something else that was more horrifying to Him?

There was, indeed, a far deeper spiritual agony, which Jesus endured for our sake; an agony we will never be able to comprehend. Words cannot sufficiently convey what it meant for the wrath of God to be poured out on Jesus at Calvary. Words cannot sufficiently explain what it would have been like for the Son of God to have His unfettered communion with the Father, enjoyed from all eternity, to be temporarily broken. Surely, this is why Jesus looked ahead to the cross with such horror.

Having recently reread Foxe's Book of Christian Martyrs, I could tell you about

the countless men and women who unflinchingly embraced their execution.

I could tell you about how the apostle Peter insisted that he be crucified upside down.

I could tell you about the 86 year-old Polycarp, who goaded his executioners with the words, "What are you waiting for? Do as you please."

I could tell you about Bishop Latimer who, alongside Bishop Ridley, reached out to embrace the flames that would soon consume them.

There is no indication that any of these prayed for 'the cup to pass them by'. That is because physical death is not enough to break a Christian sustained by grace. This is what made Christ's death so unique, and so unbearable: *the crucifixion of Christ involved the removal of God's favour.*

What made the cross *most dreadful* was not the atrocities committed against the physical body of Jesus, but rather, *what made the cross most dreadful was that Jesus experienced the horrors of hell as He received the due penalty for our sins.*

Beloved, Jesus endured all of this in our place. *Jesus endured the wrath of God as our substitute.*

Jesus was forsaken by God in order that we might never be forsaken by Him. Jesus endured the torments of the cross so that His own would never have to go through such torments.

Perhaps, the richest verse from all of our hymns this morning, describing the work of our Substitute, comes from *O Sacred Head, Sore Wounded*:

*What Thou, my Lord hast suffered, was all for sinners gain.
Mine, mine was the transgression, but Thine the deadly pain.
Lo, here I fall, my Saviour! 'Tis I deserve Thy place;
Look on me with Thy favour, vouch-safe to me Thy grace.*

Beloved, how shall we respond to such grace? How shall we then live? Again, I am content to allow our hymn to frame our response to the cross:

*What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest Friend,
For this, Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end?
O make me Thine forever; and, should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never outlive my love to Thee. Amen.*

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