

“Conversations on the Cross 4”

Reading: Psalm 22:1-24; Matthew 27:45-56

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

I think we can probably all agree that one of the qualities of a great leader is the ability to inspire people even in the darkest times. It's that quality of perseverance that maintains hope even when all seems lost, coupled with the ability to communicate that hope to people who are starting to despair. The example that always comes to mind for me is Winston Churchill, who led the British people through the dark days of World War II. He excelled at using his words to inspire hope, and he is still widely quoted today. "We shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be," he once said, "we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender." Those are words that make you want to stand up and cheer; they stir up hope. That ability to inspire people to keep going when all seems lost is incredibly important in a leader, because bad times will come, and people need to keep going in spite of them.

And that is one of the reasons why today's word from the cross is kind of surprising. Here we see Jesus very near death, apparently despairing. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" does not sound like a hopeful, inspiring cry. It sounds, in fact, like He's overwhelmed and may even be giving up. To get to the point of thinking that God has abandoned you is to be just about as low as you can get, because if God can't or won't help you, who will? And, of course, this is Jesus we're talking about. We expect Him to have it all together. We have story after story of Jesus knowing exactly what to do in whatever situation He finds Himself; again and again He knows exactly how to respond to fix the problem. Again and again, Jesus says just the right words to silence His opponents. Again and again, Jesus speaks wisdom and love into seemingly impossible situations.

But not here, we might think. Here He seems to have given up. And that's a tragic thing to see; just try to imagine how crushing it would have been if, after all his great words of hope, Winston Churchill had one day given up and surrendered. It's devastating to watch someone like that lose hope, because it makes us all question the faith we put in them from the beginning. All along in the story of Jesus' life, the question was always whether He was the anointed one of God, and here He is being crucified, and many people are taking that to be all the proof they need that He is not actually the Messiah: Messiahs don't get crucified. And now Jesus cries out and asks God why God has forsaken Him, why God has abandoned Him, why God has deserted Him in His hour of greatest need. Jesus is going to die on that cross; God is not going to save Him. I guess we'll have to start looking for another candidate for Messiah, because Messiahs are by definition not forsaken by God.

The way that I've always heard this cry from the cross interpreted is that this is the moment when Jesus truly takes on all of the sins of the world, and because God hates sin, God the Father turns His face away from God the Son. Jesus is taking our place on that cross, in other words, and so Jesus is getting the punishment that you and I and everyone else who's ever lived deserve. God is, therefore, quite literally forsaking Jesus at this moment because of our sin, the thinking goes. There may be something to that interpretation, because Paul does say in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." I'll just say that I think the logic most preachers use there is a little fuzzy; I'm not so sure it works with the text to assume that there is some sort of celestial transaction taking place in which every specific

sinful act every person has committed is somehow invisibly transferred onto Jesus at this moment, and God the Father is therefore venting His rage on Jesus rather than you and me. I don't think that's a reading that does justice to the text, but rather than getting into all of why I say that, let me point us in the direction of what I think is a deeper meaning to this text.

That being said, it is certainly true that here on the cross, sin is on display for all to see, and that sin is an offense against God and all He has intended for us. This is indeed a cry of anguish at the horror of sin. Sin seems to be having a field day here at the cross. This is what sin does: it takes the beautiful things of God and lashes out at them in hateful rage. It takes the mercy of God and perverts it into an unjust spectacle. It takes those who should have been God's most beloved children and twists them into spiteful, self-righteous enemies of God. It takes God's long-awaited Messiah and nails Him to a cross. And Jesus, the one who is at the center of all of this horror, cries out in anguish at what sin does. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And in speaking those words, Jesus does two things: He convicts us of the horrors of our own sin, and He sanctifies our own cries of distress. We'd better not look at the cross and fail to see the horror of sin on display, and therefore we'd better not fail to see the horror of what each one of us does and could do. We cannot afford to take our sin lightly. The noblest human being is perfectly capable, in the right circumstances, of becoming the most horrendous monster, if we do not take our sin seriously. I'd bet you've been shocked to find yourself there, or very nearly there, at some point in your life; I know I have. And in that moment of the shock of realizing how deep your sin goes, when you cry out in distress, Jesus cries out with you. The anguish we feel is not foreign to Him.

But there's more going on here than meets the eye. Remember that we've been assuming that each one of these words from the cross is very intentional; Jesus didn't speak them on accident and the gospel writers didn't record them on accident, either. These very short words from the cross are kind of a condensed commentary on what Jesus thinks is happening here and how He's interpreting it. So as Jesus' followers reflected on the meaning of these words from the cross, it didn't take long before someone made the connection that this cry of Jesus is the first line of Psalm 22.

We have to admit that of course we don't know exactly what was going through Jesus' mind, so it is just possible that all He meant was to express His anguish, and because He was so steeped in Scripture, those were the first words that came to mind. We have to leave room for the possibility that He wasn't intending us to read all of Psalm 22 into His brief cry. If I'm having a bad day and I say, "I can't get no relief," maybe it's because I just listened to "All Along the Watchtower" by Bob Dylan and the words are fresh in my mind; I'm not necessarily alluding to the entire song with all of its implications and meanings. Maybe Jesus was doing the same thing, and this was just a cry of distress that used language from the Psalms.

But even though we can't put ourselves inside Jesus' head, it does become pretty clear from closer inspection that the writers of the gospels wanted us to think of Psalm 22 when we hear this cry. This word from the cross only appears in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, but both gospel writers leave us clues pointing us back to the Psalm. For example, this cry is quoted in Aramaic, which is probably the language Jesus spoke, and then translated for us. That's unusual; everything but a few scattered words and phrases in the New Testament are in Greek. Maybe the gospel writers just wanted to help us understand why people thought Jesus was crying out to Elijah, but even so, right

away, we should be looking for something special in this cry. There are also these details in the account of the crucifixion that come straight out of Psalm 22. For example, the part about the soldiers gambling for Jesus' clothing reflects Psalm 22:18. Jesus is offered a drink; Psalm 22:15 mentions that the psalmist's mouth is dried up like broken pottery. In Psalm 22:16, the psalmist's hands and feet are pierced, just like what happened to Jesus. The taunts from the crowd are very similar to the words of Psalm 22:8. And then there's the fact that it's always been common practice to refer back to a psalm by quoting its first line.

The point is that we're supposed to hear this word from the cross and think about all the connections back to Psalm 22, written centuries earlier. This is a cry of distress and anguish, but it's not a cry of despair. The psalm describes a situation very much like what Jesus was facing: he's abandoned by everyone, everyone has rejected him and attacked him, and he has no reason to look for help from any of them. Everyone is, in other words, shaming him. He's an object of their scorn. And in the midst of that shame, the psalmist cries out to God. He uses strong language, of course, asking why God has forsaken him, but that cry by itself assumes that God is still listening. And in fact as we continue through the song, it's clear that in spite of the desperate circumstances of the psalmist, he is still trusting that God will save him. He asks God not to be far from him, to deliver him, and the song ends on a note of praise to God for His faithfulness and power. So when Jesus utters this cry that sounds so desperate, it is in fact pointing us beyond the anguish of the moment and on to His deeper trust in God's deliverance, which we know comes on Easter.

It is a song that shows us the intersection of shame, of the terrible consequences of sin, and of the powerful victory of God. It shows us that when it seems like all you have left is the shame other people heap on you, when it seems like sin's consequences have taken control, there is still reason to cry out to God. In other words, it shows us that God listens to the cries that everyone else ignores. Maybe they're ignoring the cry because they just don't care, or maybe because they're your enemies, or maybe because they don't really understand. Jesus had all of those people gathered around Him on the cross. Many of them heard what He said but weren't listening closely enough, so they thought they heard something else. Whatever the reasons, there are cries of anguish that no one is listening to, no one cares about, except God.

There may be cries of anguish from your heart that no one else has heard; God is listening, and God is faithful to save. There are cries of distress from our community and our world that are being ignored; God is listening, and God is faithful to save. And here's the thing: because we are marked with the blood of Christ, we are invited to listen to those cries, too. We are invited to have broken hearts at the sin in us and in our world, and then to listen for those who are crying out in their pain. The church doesn't always have a very good reputation when it comes to listening to those cries. We tend to have more of a preference for putting our best foot forward, keeping a stiff upper lip, never showing weakness or admitting to one another that we're struggling with our families, our jobs, our habits, our thoughts. But of all the places in the world, the church should be the first place we come to cry out our anguish. The church should be the safest place for those who are hurting to come and cry out their distress.

One of the classic texts for Lent is that line from Joel 2:13: "Rend your heart and not your garments." Have a broken and repentant heart before you start worrying about an outward show of repentance. Today as we are confronted by a cry of anguish at the effects of sin, we are likewise

confronted with the cries of anguish that result from our own sinful choices. As we are confronted by the cry of Jesus that so many people ignored, we are likewise confronted by the cries of the people around us that we so regularly ignore. To get ready for the celebration of Easter, we must first prepare ourselves through the season of Lent: bring a repentant heart before your God.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)