

St. John's Citadel Salvation Army Church  
Lenten Series—Final Words from the Cross  
Dr. Jonathan Dent

“My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?”

Let me first of all thank those who have planned these times together and given me the invitation to speak a second time here. I greatly appreciate having the opportunity to speak here, as this is our home church, in many senses of the word. Now you know I am a Presbyterian Minister and that I don't even come too many Sundays as I am usually elsewhere on Sunday morning. But my wife Lynn grew up here and ever since 1981 or so, I've been attending this church, starting in the old building on this cite with Lynn. The Osmond family presence is here and I am grateful to speak in that context.

The final words from the Cross as a theme is probably one of the most appropriate choices of topics for our time together. Today's utterance from the Cross may be one of the most controversial and least understood. I do want to first of all answer the question that Jesus asks from the Cross, that is, in modern English, “Why, O God, have you abandoned me?” Abandonment is a huge issue today, but I don't want to lose, first of all, the historical context of Jesus uttering these words from the Cross and their faithful record in the Gospels of Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34.

Matthew and Mark recorded the exact words of Jesus from the Cross, the only words in the original language: “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*” is about ten syllables. Jesus had undergone much blood loss, from the scourging and the crown of thorns. He also had endured the strain of being pierced through in his wrists and legs. It is amazing that since he had carried his own cross down the road and partly up the hill, even with the help of Simon, that he had not gone unconscious. His wounds and torture to this point in time with his being on the cross made it clear that what he said from the cross was going to be short and to the point.

It is interesting that both Matthew and Mark relay what he said in the original language, so there would be no doubt that he in fact said what he said. Those near him thought he was calling out to Elijah, but this was no plea to a prophet, this was the heartfelt prayer of the Son of God.

And here is where we ask ourselves how we see Jesus. We know he was both 100% God and 100% human. As we see him on the cross, indeed, as we see him throughout his early life and then into his short earthly ministry, how do we view Jesus. Let me tell you up front that I see him as laying aside his divine powers, just as Paul says in Philippians 2:6, "Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant..." Jesus laid aside his divine powers and insight. He lived a human life so that we could relate to him and follow him as human beings. He did not go into divine overdrive when he healed the sick or raised the dead. These miracles were accomplished as a human being and were later performed by the apostles as well.

Jesus, in his most horrific moment as a human being, asked his heavenly Father, his Dad, the closest person in his life besides the Holy Spirit; he asks His Dad why He abandoned him. Stay there for a moment. Let that sink in. We know he is prophetically quoting Psalm 22, verse 1 word for word. But this is more than just quoting the Bible. This is an existential cry. Jesus had never endured separation from the Father.

But in that terrible moment when the sins of the world were placed on him and he took the penalty we deserved for our sins, the Father turned his face away, and the presence of the Father moved away from the Son. This is perhaps the greatest torture, worse than all the physical torturing that has taken place. The Father's presence, mission, love, care, support, and smile was continually the motivation, the encouragement, the provocation to do the ministry of the Messiah. Now fulfilling all the Suffering Servant prophecies of Isaiah 53, Jesus takes our sins on himself, takes our death sentence, takes our alienation from God, takes our loneliness, takes our sense of abandonment. In that moment, which we do not know how long it lasts, but probably until his death; Jesus takes on himself what many of us suffer so much in this life. So he understands. He is with us in our loneliness and discouragement and confusion. He is with us and has taken away the ultimate alienation from God for us. He is with us.

The Good News is on the way, but at this moment in history Jesus feels the existential angst, the terrible void, the reason that so many are so depressed, so despairing of life itself. Jesus knows at that moment on the Cross that someplace within himself that there are answers, that the Mission and the Message are being fulfilled through this most horrific of acts against God

ever perpetrated in human history. God himself tortured to death by his own people, by the ruling government, by the words and testimony of the crowds, the passers by, and yes, you and I.

We too would have forsaken him that day as did all but one of the twelve. We would have abandoned the Suffering Servant because it was all too much and what sense did it make? Why would God allow this to happen to him? Here is the great reflection for us. Jesus accomplished for us what we could not accomplish for ourselves.

Now when we feel alone and abandoned, whether it was due to parents who are workaholic or alcoholic or drug addicted, or perhaps our parents were church workers or military personnel who had no time for us or sports addicts or video or sex addicts who were never quite there for us. Perhaps our parents died prematurely or other friends or family members. When we feel alone and abandoned, we can know for sure that Jesus understands us. Even if we have had or have now mental illness and difficulties of the worst kind, Jesus puts his arms around us, holds us up when all we can do is fall over.

When we feel the weight of the world on us, Jesus can take us in his arms. You and I know that we are not the Messiah, we are not the Saviour of the world, Jesus is. But sometimes we take the weight of all those duties, whether in church leadership, or in family responsibilities, or at work, or in our schools or in government or in the media, we take the weight of it on ourselves, the anxiety of it, the fear of it on ourselves. We know at some deep place that we cannot control the people and the circumstances around us. We know that all we can do is take the responsibility of this day and its weight, and let Jesus bear it with us. In fact, he takes the brunt of it, when we invite him into the mutual yoke, that he calls easy and light. (Matthew 11:30) I have to admit it that it doesn't feel easy and light. But Jesus being there makes the difference.

Many things in our lives are anything but easy and light. And the hardest thing may be that we have nowhere to be ourselves. At home, there is a measure of safety, but there are family dynamics. It's easy to be lonely at home. At work, we can't be the person that is broken inside, so we try to put our best foot forward, our best face on. At church, we know we are supposed to be free to be ourselves in Christ and to be honest about all the

parts of our lives, but there are parts of our inner lives that are so broken, we dare not share them.

So some of us go to twelve step groups to share our brokenness, addictions of alcohol, drugs, food, sex, needing deeply to be liked, lying, and stealing and everything Jesus says we all share, on the Sermon on the Mount. There he warns us to not think we are better than the adulterer or the murderer, because we are not. We who have had bad thoughts are murderers too. We who have had lustful thoughts against our neighbours, co-workers, friends and acquaintances are adulterers too. We are just as needy as any of those currently serving time at HMP. And as we admit our neediness and loneliness, we can reach out to others as real persons in need, not worrying about how others see us, but simply choosing to put away the abandonment in favour of connecting with other Christians, other human beings. Make the choice to connect with a small group. Make the choice to be honest in a safe place. Make the choice against your loneliness in favour of being part of the Christian community. You who are here already know this. I'm preaching to the choir. But this is finding a place where you can share your brokenness, your neediness, your turmoil and not be judged or offered a quick fix. This may be found, for example, in the Christian Twelve Steps, called Celebrate Recovery, or in the Living Waters, which ministers to those with sexual and emotional brokenness, same sex attraction, gender confusion, codependency, anger and resentment issues, you name it. These programs are just two of dozens that are available to us who know the loneliness of having to look like something on the outside that we are not on the inside.

We play the game of looking good. But we are not good, and Jesus went to the Cross for that fact. And not just a few of us, all of us.

We too utter with our Lord, "Why have you forsaken me?" We too need God, need Jesus, need the Holy Spirit and one another. But we find it hard to connect. Let us receive anew what Jesus did for us on the Cross that Friday long ago. Let us risk anew sharing and connecting with fellow believers those parts of ourselves that God wants to transform, where there is no unhappiness too great to be lessened and no burden too heavy to be lifted. Don't settle for your loneliness. Search and find that group where you can share your very self, broken and needy, and I'm sure I can help you, the officers here can help you, the Christian community can help, as you reach out, as we reach out to each other. Let us pray.