

“Forsaken?”

Matthew 27:45-49

Last year I was part of a group of Reformed pastors, worship leaders, and theologians who were tasked with vetting the Top 100 songs on CCLI. CCLI, or Christian Copyright Licensing International, is one of two major licensing organizations that gives churches the rights to sing copyrighted songs – which is just about every song written post-1950. As part of that agreement, we report each year which songs we sing. The folks at CCLI then publish lists of the top 25 and top 100 songs being reported and sung in churches around the world.

Our job was to vet the top 100 songs from last year based on a number of criteria, and to then publish our list with comments so worship leaders and worship committees could evaluate their own song diet. We looked at singability and whether churches that don’t have a twelve-person band could pull off a song, but mostly we looked at the lyrics and whether they were Scripturally based, and in our case, whether they reflected Reformed theology.

The whole premise for a project like this is that the songs we sing in church shape us. They inform our theology, inform what we come to believe about God and ourselves and the church. Songs stick with us in a way that sermons generally don’t. I can preach a sermon on grace ‘til the cows come home, but on your deathbed, you likely won’t be repeating anything I’ve said...you’ll be softly singing “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

So what we sing matters. And it always has. Before CCLI and top 100 lists came along, we had hymnal committees. Groups that spent years prayerfully deciding what songs to include in a book that can only contain so many songs.

In 2013, one such hymnal committee made a controversial decision. Right around the time our new hymnal, *Lift Up Your Hearts*, was coming out, the Presbyterian Church USA published their own hymnal, *Glory to God*. Our hymnal contained the beloved Getty hymn, "In Christ Alone." The Presbyterian hymnal did not.

Because "In Christ Alone" contains a rather controversial line. "There on that cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied."

The committee voted 9-6 in favour of dropping the hymn because of that line. One member who voted in support of the move said, "That lyric comes close to saying that God killed Jesus. The cross is not an instrument of God's wrath."

Others weren't convinced. A committee member who voted against dropping the song said the line simply means that Jesus paid the whole price for sins, that "there's no more work to be done...It is finished."

The response to the committee's decision was equally divided. Some said this was just another symptom of the church downplaying parts of Christian doctrine that offend our sensibilities. Others supported the decision...one hymnal had already, and without permission, changed the line to read, "the love of God was magnified," believing it more important to focus on God's love than on his wrath.

What the whole ordeal demonstrated is that we have a hard time with the idea of a wrathful God. In particular, we have a hard time with a God who is wrathful against...himself. The Father, wrathful toward the Son. How on earth could that be?

This question sparked another song controversy. "How Deep the Father's Love for Us," incidentally penned by one of the writers of "In Christ Alone," Stuart Townend, includes the line, "The Father turns his face away."

The internet is full of blogs digging into this line. *Did* the Father turn his face away? Did the Father, in fact, abandon the Son? How could that possibly be?

And all of this comes to a head in Matthew 27. Because this fourth word Jesus speaks from the cross is one of abandonment.

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

This is the first line of Psalm 22, the psalm that’s formed much of our liturgy this morning. It’s a psalm of David, and one of many psalms of lament found in the psalter.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.”

Just as we might recall the words of “Amazing Grace” in our hour of need, this is Jesus – in agony and anguish, pulling from the very depths of his soul words that have engrained themselves deep within him over years of Bible study. In a moment when he can barely speak, he utters words he doesn’t have to think about, but which describe his situation profoundly. He speaks of being forsaken by God.

Which presents us with a problem. Actually, it presents us with a couple problems.

First is the problem of the Trinity. God is...one. Three persons, but indivisible. There is such deep unity at the heart of the Trinity, that it simply should not be possible for there to be any kind of forsaking, any abandoning, of one person of the Trinity by another. How can there be separation within a perfect whole?

Second is the problem of a God who won’t behave the way we expect him to.

Because we have our ideas of who God is and how he should behave. We believe God is loving, that God is compassionate, that God hears the cries of the lowly.

We believe that God is powerful, that he works things for the good of those who love him, that he has the power to fix things.

So we would expect, in this hour of darkness, that God the Father, out of love for his only Son, and in the power only God contains, would swoop down upon that hill and rescue Jesus from that cross. We would expect that Jesus, *being* God, would do exactly as all the crowds have been taunting him to do, and save himself.

But God doesn't do this on Golgotha. The Father doesn't save the Son. God doesn't save himself.

And if God won't save *his own self*...then where does that leave us?

Because we want God to swoop in and rescue us. To save the day, to bring us up out of whatever pit we've fallen into, to bring us out of whatever misery surrounds us, and to make things right.

And maybe, when we really stop to think about it, beyond any rescuing we might need, we want God to make things work out for us exactly how we want them to work out. We want God to be on our side, making things happen, opening doors and connecting us with the right people so our lives turns out exactly as our 5, 10, and 20-year plans hoped they would. And our 5, 10, and 20-year plans generally don't include suffering and darkness.

Will Willimon writes,

We don't want to overhear such terrible, terrifying words, "My God, why have you abandoned me" because we don't want to know that that's the kind of God we've got, the kind of God who

does not always work the world to our benefit, the kind of God who, when it gets dark, doesn't immediately switch on the lights but rather comes and hangs out with us, on the cross, in the dark, and lets us in on the most intimate of conversations within the very heart of the Trinity.

That last line is an important one. This is a conversation happening at the very heart of the Trinity. It is a deep mystery, what happens here on Golgotha. No theologian has ever or will ever be able to explain just what it means for the Father to forsake the Son, for the Trinity to be somehow divided, even as it yet remains one.

But what we do know, because of Jesus' last words on the cross, because of his insistent conversation with the Father, is that the cross is not a thing that God the Father did *to* God the Son, but that the Son and Father are doing this together.

Jesus did not go to the cross as one who has no choice. Jesus left the Father's side, left the glorious riches of heaven, became incarnate as a baby, lived and experienced human life, and then went to Jerusalem just before the Passover fully knowing what waited for him, and knowing that he must do it.

This is the very heart of God's mission to save his people. Jesus must take on the sins of the people, *all* the sins of all the people, of all times and all places, and bear the punishment such sins deserved. Only one who is fully human, and fully divine, could accomplish this. For only then would the perfect justice of God be satisfied. Only then could we, his beloved children, be free from the punishment we deserve.

Willimon writes,

The Father, in infinite love, has sent the Son out to the far country to us sinners...The Son comes close to us, so close that he bears our

sinfulness, bears the brunt of our viciousness. And the Father, who is complete righteousness and holiness, cannot embrace the sin that the Son so recklessly, lovingly bears, so the Father must abandon the Son on the cross because the Father is both love and righteousness.

The holy and righteous Father cannot embrace that which is sinful. So the Father turns his face away. And that, more than the physical agony of the cross, is the punishment Jesus bore for us. Because that, that kind of separation from God, is hell.

There's lots of debate about the line in the Apostle's Creed, "He descended into hell," because Scripture doesn't actually ever say that. But John Calvin argues that it's this moment on the cross that supports that line. Jesus did not literally descend into a place, but in his abandonment by Father and Spirit, experienced hell.

C.S. Lewis, in *The Great Divorce*, describes hell as a place where people experience separation from God because, in their own pride and vanity, they chose to follow their own sinful natures instead of turn to God. He wrote, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done."

The Apostle Paul helps us understand this in his letter to the Romans. In chapter 6 he says, "Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?"

Sin, capital S Sin, isn't just a wrongstep here and a misdeed here. It is a power, an enslaving power, that takes hold of us, that keeps us in its grip, so we do the things we do not want to do, and don't do the

things we know we should. It is that power that God set out to vanquish by going to the cross. And, as Fleming Rutledge writes, on the cross, in this horrific mode of execution, as he was condemned under the judgment of Rome, Jesus also surrendered himself to the dictatorship of Sin, taking our place. So Paul can write, “thanks be to God that, though you *used* to be slaves to sin...you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.”

Because Christ surrendered to the dictatorship of Sin, and by surrendering, destroyed its power, we live now not under the reign of sin and evil, but under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus bore the punishment such sin deserves, we live, not as those condemned by the law, but as those held in the mercy of God.

The old communion liturgy put it this way: “He took upon himself our flesh and blood and fulfilled for us all obedience to the divine law, even to the bitter and shameful death of the cross, where he cried out with a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” so that we might be accepted by God and *never* be forsaken by him.”

Christ was forsaken so we would not be.

So did the Father turn his face away?

Yes. But he did so because he is a God of righteousness...and love. In righteousness he turned away from the sin that Jesus took on himself. But it was love that led the Son to go toward that cross in the first place.

So in a moment we’ll sing of that love. A love that goes beyond our own sensibilities, a love that seeks us out even when we choose our own wills over the Fathers’, a love that says that nothing can separate us from God.

Why should we gain from His reward? We cannot give an answer.
But we know with all our hearts, his wounds have paid our ransom.

Would you pray with me?

Father God, thank you that you loved the world so much that you
gave your only Son, so that whoever believes in him would not
perish...would not be forsaken...but would have eternal life.

O Jesus, thank you for the incredible gift of your sacrifice, for taking
our sin upon you and bearing the punishment we deserved, that we
might be freed from the power of Sin, and live instead in the light of
your mercy.

Holy Spirit, unite us with Christ, that we might die to ourselves, to the
grip sin yet has over us, and so be raised to new life with Jesus.

Triune God, you are a mystery we cannot comprehend,
and in awe and humility, we worship you.

May the love of the Trinity, and the love you have for us,
be reflected in our love for one another.

We pray this in Jesus' name, and in the power of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.