Psalms - Commentaries by Stanley Bruce Anstey

Christ Forsaken of God: Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:45-46, Forsaking of Christ, The

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(Matthew 27:45-46; John 19:30)

“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. 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?” (Matt. 27:45-46).

“When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, He said, It is finished” (John 19:30).

The Lord Jesus uttered the above cries when He was on the cross. Both are quotations recorded in Psalm 22. The Psalm opens with the first cry and closes with the second. Those who are familiar with the original language tell us that, “He hath done this” (Psa. 22:31) is equivalent to, “It is finished.” The first was a vicarious cry; the other is a victorious cry!

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There has been some confusion of thought, however, as to what the Father was doing at the time of Christ's forsaking on the cross. Some have thought that He was having sweet fellowship and communion with His Son at that time, even though He was forsaken of God. This idea has been taken from the fact that Scripture does not say that the Lord was forsaken of the Father in that dark hour. It is assumed, therefore, that the Lord was in full communion with His Father when He was forsaken of God. Hence, in some mysterious way, the Father was having communion with Him, but God was not.

However, this is a dangerous way of interpreting the Scriptures. It is assuming something is so because Scripture is silent about it. This is not a sound principle of Bible exegesis, for it opens the door to inferring things into the Scriptures. If this idea were true—concerning the Father having communion with the Son during His forsaking—then we could also say that Jehovah, the Most High, the Almighty, etc. were also having communion with the Lord at that time, because Scripture doesn't say that they weren't! As a rule, we do not learn the truth from what is not in Scripture, but from what is in Scripture.

The Scriptural Use of “God” and “Father”

The reason why Scripture does not say that the Lord was forsaken of the Father when He was on the cross is that the subject is atonement. As a rule, when Scripture deals with sin and its judgment, “God” is used. Likewise, when Scripture treats the subject of our life and relationship in the family of God, it uses “the Father.” Therefore, in keeping with this rule, when the Lord was suffering for our sins, He cried, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46) It was a fulfillment of Psalm 22:1.

W. Kelly said, “God is the judge of sin. It was not a question with the Father as such, but with God as God touching sin. ... when looking on deliverance, or enjoyed relationship, the godly Israelite speaks of Jehovah. But in the New Testament, while God remains God and must ever be the judge of sin, Father is the characteristic term of a relationship which the Son of God knew from eternity” (Bible Treasury, vol. 8 NS, p. 114). Scripture carefully follows this order distinguishing what pertains to "God" and what pertains to "the Father," even though they are the same Person. In accord with this, in gospel work, we do not tell the sinner that he has to do with the Father about the question of his sins; we tell him that he has to do with God. It betrays a lack of intelligence in divine things to associate the Father with matters having to do with the expiation of sin.

J. N. Darby said, “During the whole of His life of service, all through, including Gethsemane, Christ never addresses God by the name of God. He always says, ‘Father.’ On the cross we know His words were, ‘My God, My God.’ In His life this title would have been out of place—not, of course, because it did not belong to Him whom He addressed—but because it was not the expression of the unclouded relationship and conscious blessedness of Sonship in which the blessed Lord always stood. On the cross God was dealing with Him about sin, and therefore as God, in His nature, majesty, righteousness, and truth. Here, sin was to be dealt with as such by God, and the blessed One expresses according to truth the position in which His holy soul stood” (Collected Writings, vol. 7, p. 201).

Communion was Interrupted

Some have taken it so far as to say that “communion was never more sweet” between the Father and the Son than when He was forsaken of God! Such ideas misrepresent the forsaking, and imply that the Father was in fellowship with sin, for at that moment Christ was “made sin!” (2 Cor. 5:21) The truth is that communion between the first Person in the Godhead and the second Person in the Godhead was broken in that dark hour.

The following Scriptures indicate this. In Luke 23:34, which is before the three hours of darkness, He said "Father..." and after the hours of darkness were over, He again said, "Father..." (Luke 23:46). But in between, during the forsaking, no such words were used. Thus, He spoke to His Father before the hours when atonement was made, and after, but not during. Also, in Psalm 69:13, which has to do with His martyrdom sufferings in the first three hours on the cross, He said, "As for Me, My prayer is unto Thee, O LORD, in an acceptable time." But in Psalm 22:2, which refers to the last three hours, He said, "I cry in the daytime, but Thou hearest not." In keeping with this, we have been rightly taught not to use such language as "the Father forsook the Son." But this is not because the Father was having fellowship with Him, but because it is unintelligent to associate the Father with the judgment of sin.

The Atoning Sufferings of Christ are Mitigated If the Father Was Comforting Christ When He Was Forsaken
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As mentioned, people have imagined that the Father was in full communion with His Son when He was making atonement for sin. This mistaken idea could lead a person to think that while He was forsaken of God, He still had the comfort of His Father! This mitigates the atoning sufferings of Christ and does not portray a true picture of what happened during the forsaking. In essence, it is making Christ's death on the cross a "sodden" sacrifice (Ex. 12:9). In the type of the Passover lamb Jehovah gave specific directions to Moses that it was not to be "sodden at all with water." The lamb was not to be boiled, because it would misrepresent the sufferings of Christ. The heat of water can only rise to 212 degrees F and no higher; whereas, being exposed to the open flame of the fire, which is the way it was to be roasted, more accurately typifies the intensity of suffering through which Christ went.

It Separates the First Person of the Godhead Into Two Persons!

Furthermore, to speak of God not having communion with Christ while the Father was, separates the first Person in the Godhead into acting as more than one Person. Needless to say, this is dangerous ground to take. The simple truth is that communion was broken between God and the Lord Jesus Christ during that dark hour of forsaking.

The reason Scripture does not use the name of the "Father" when Christ was forsaken is because God was not acting in that capacity at that time; it was not because He was in communion with Him. It has been said that a judge, passing sentence on a boy—his own son, gave him the severest sentence that was possible under the law—a heavy fine. Having passed the sentence, he left the bench and paid the fine. On the bench he could not act as the father of the boy, even though he was all along. It is quite the same at the cross. During the forsaking, when Christ was bearing the awful wrath of God against sin, God was not acting as the Father, even though He was the Father of the Son at that crucial moment. He was dealing with sin according to the claims of His nature, and so Christ was forsaken.

Complacency is Not Communion

Having said this, it is important to understand that even while the Lord Jesus was forsaken, He was still the object of His Father's complacency. (By using the word "complacency" we do not mean that God was careless and indifferent toward Christ while forsaken, but that He was well pleased, which is the older, original meaning of the word.) The Lord Jesus had a special place in His Father's affections that always existed and always will exist (Prov. 8:30; Matt. 3:17). He was always "in the bosom of the Father" (John 1:18). He never—even in the three hours of forsaking—ceased to be loved and pleasing to His Father. He perhaps was never more pleasing to His Father than during that time, because He was doing His will perfectly (Isa. 53:10). But Christ could not enjoy that fact, because communion was broken. J. N. Darby said, "Never was there a moment of the Father's more perfect delight in Him ... " (Collected Writings, vol. 17, p. 331). But this has been sadly construed into, "Communion was never more sweet..." which is simply not true. Complacency is not communion. That the Father was never more pleased with Him does not mean that He was having communion with Him. J. N. Darby also said, "I believe that there never was a time when the Father's complacency in the Son was so great as at that solemn moment; but that is not the communion of complacency. 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' is not the enjoyment of communion" (Collected Writings, vol. 7, p. 202, footnote).

An Illustration

To illustrate the difference between complacency and communion, suppose a few centuries ago—when they did not have modern communications—that there was a man who had some important business overseas that required attention. And because of some personal hindrance, he was unable to go, and therefore, he sent his son. It would mean that while the son was away, the two would be unable to communicate, for in those days such a thing was not possible. Notwithstanding, even though they were unable to be in communion with each other, the son never ceased to be in the affections of the father. His father would be very pleased with his son in undertaking that task for him. While communion was interrupted between the two, the complacency of the father was not.

The Father loves the Son because of Who He is (John 3:35, 5:20), and for what He did on the cross in making atonement (John 10:17), but He could not have communion with Him at that time when He was made sin, because God the Father cannot have communion with sin (2 Cor. 5:21). His eternal relationship to the Father, as Son, and the eternal disposition of the Father toward Him remained unchanged and unbroken, even when He was forsaken—but communion was broken. How solemn this is; that which He valued the most was cut off. It gives us a hint as to just how great a price He paid to put away our sins.

Quotes From Respected Teachers Concerning This Subject

J. N. Darby said, "The shadow of death only grew thicker up to Gethsemane, where its deepest shades enveloped the soul of Jesus, and where He took in His hand the cup which contained that which had thrown its shadow on His soul all along the way, but which now penetrated it with its most profound darkness. One only thing remained to Him up to the cross, and even in the sufferings of perfect obedience—communion with His Father; at the cross, obedience was accomplished, and the communion was lost." (Collected Writings, vol. 33, p. 236)

W. Kelly said, "He must drink the cup to the dregs, be made sin, and bear our sins in His body on the tree, have God His God, dealing with Him, as thus giving Himself as a sacrifice up to God for sin, where all was darkness and not a ray of kindly light could enter. Till then He walked in the unclouded enjoyment of His Father's love." (Bible Treasury, vol. 4 NS, p. 272)

Re. John 1:18 — "which is in the bosom of the Father." "On the cross Christ was under wrath, and therefore—although He was then doing something on account of which the Father would in a very especial sense love Him—yet then He could not be enjoying the relationship with Him and His Father. In one sense, the Father never loved the Son so much as when He was upon the cross. This was what was in the Father's mind, not what was in Christ's, who could not be enjoying His relationship and drinking the cup of wrath at the same time" (Girdle of Truth, vol. 7, p. 375).

F. G. Patterson said, "His was a life of sorrow here below, but there never was a cloud during His whole pathway between Him and His Father. It was a life of perfect unity of thought and object, as He lived by His Father. 'I live by the Father.' (John 6:57.) There was one solemn moment when the three hours' darkness and sin-bearing and judgment on the cross shut this out" (Words of Truth, vol. 1, p. 141).

A. H. Rule said, "There was nothing around Him, nothing in all in this sin-stricken sorrowful scene, to comfort His weary, suffering heart. But he could always look up, and always find comfort there. The beams of a loving Father's face, and the radiancy of heavenly glory always shone upon Him; and thus He trod His sorrowful path, for while all was dark below, all was light above. A more terrible hour awaited the Lord—the

last in His earthly path and life of sorrow. As the end drew on, it cast its dark and gloomy shadow over His soul, and He uttered such words as these: ‘My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.’ And when the horrors of that hour were pressed upon His soul by the power of the adversary, we find Him sweating great drops of blood, and crying with strong crying and tears to Him who was able to deliver. Even then He was heard—heard for piety—and an angel was sent to strengthen Him. He was still in the enjoyment of unbroken communion with His Father: the light was still shining down upon Him from above. But the hour of deeper sorrow came, and with fixed purpose He met it. He gave Himself up into the hands of men, and presented Himself to God, to be made sin for us, a curse for those under the curse, a victim to bear the judgment of God against sin. Thus He offered Himself to God, and was made an offering for sin though He knew no sin. And now the light which hitherto shone full upon Him all along His path was withdrawn” (Selected Writings, vol. 1, pp. 62-63).

J. N. Darby said, “But it never said He took delight in suffering for sin; He says, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me;” the having His Father’s countenance withdrawn from Him, when bearing the sin” (Collected Writings, vol. 26, pp. 60-61). “None of us can fathom what it was to One who had dwelt in the bosom of the Father, to find His soul as man forsaken of Him, and that as made sin” (Letters, vol. 3, p. 195). “On the cross, in the hour of drinking the cup, He says, “My God;” after it (because now as Man He is going to glory in righteousness, and has brought us there with Him), “My God and My Father,” for He is re-entered into the full enjoyment of Sonship again” (Collected Writings, vol. 23, p. 249).

He also said, "His spirit having always the sentiments which God produces in man, and in absolute communion with God, except when He suffered upon the cross” (Letters, vol. 1, p. 282). And again, “The relationship of a Son with a Father who was always heard, He was always in the enjoyment of, till the cross” (Letters, vol. 1, p. 269). And again, “Till the cross the Lord walked in the enjoyment of the relationship of a Son with the Father” (Collected Writings, vol. 7, pp. 201-202).

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May God give us the grace to hold fast the faithful Word (Titus 1:9).

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