

# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 27: 32-56

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 16, 2025  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

### Matthew 27: 32-56

#### The Crucifixion of Jesus

32 As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. 33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), 34 they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. 35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; 36 then they sat down there and kept watch over him. 37 Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” 38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” 41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42 “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son.’” 44 The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

#### The Death of Jesus

45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46 And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” 47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” 48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. 49 But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” 50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” 55 Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. 56 Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

#### My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Over the years, I have learned as a preacher to be very careful when it comes to comparing ourselves to the people we read about in the Bible. And I get it—it is altogether natural to make certain connections and to think about how a story and its characters apply to our life.

I mean, at some level, who doesn't read the story about how Joseph was wronged by his brothers and not think about those times in our own lives when we might experience betrayal? And it certainly doesn't surprise me that when we read about how Ruth lost her husband and yet remained loyal to her mother-in-law, we would find courage to be faithful in those dark chapters of our lives and to trust that God can redeem them. I bet that most of us, upon hearing the story of David facing Goliath, have found in that story the courage to face our own personal giants.

But can any of us truly relate to Joseph, whose brothers literally sold him into slavery? Do our stories really compare to Ruth's story—a Moabite peasant woman with no status whatsoever, who lost her husband, her brothers-in-law, her father-in-law, and who left behind everything she had ever known and ventured into an unknown future? And those giants of ours—be they illness, financial struggles, or whatever the burden may be—they seem to lack the teeth of a nearly 9-foot man wearing 125 pounds of armor and holding a sword in his hand.

Praise be to God that we learn from all the stories in the Bible, from all the people, and from all the grace contained therein. But we should always keep in mind that there are limits to our ability to wear someone else's shoes, as it were. We can't read the story of Abraham and say that because we know something of sacrifice, we can relate to what it must have felt like for Abraham to bind his child Isaac at the Lord's command and then be faced with such a gut-wrenching decision.

Clearly, we should always honor the work of the Holy Spirit to take what we read in the Bible and apply it to our lives. Still, it is important for us to at least respect the experiential distance between the stories in the Bible and the stories of our lives—and that's even more true when we are talking about the life of Jesus.

In this morning's New Testament lesson, we are presented with something that Jesus experienced, which, by God's grace, none of us will ever experience: He was forsaken.

We allude to this aspect of Jesus' atoning work on the cross around the time of Lent and Easter each year. But what does that really mean? Does it mean that Jesus felt bad? That the cross hurt? Does it mean that Jesus was about to die and thought to himself, "Oh my goodness, I almost forgot—Psalm 22 talks about how the Messiah would be forsaken by God. I had better say that quickly before I die so that those folks who are keeping track of all the messianic prophecies can recall it"?

I don't think that just before Jesus breathed his last, he looked up to heaven with the fulfillment of a prophecy in mind. I didn't read these words from Matthew's Gospel with quite the tone and inflection in which they are written. It says that at about 3 o'clock, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I, for one, believe that when Jesus expresses his forsakenness, he was actually forsaken.

Within our Judaic heritage, it seems to me that the greatest concern that existed for the people of God was that things would go so terribly wrong that God would not be with them—that he would look away, that he would essentially turn his back on them. Conversely, the opposite seemed to be their greatest and most hoped-for joy: that God would be present with them, as if face to face.

This Aaron affirms when he says, "May the Lord bless and keep you! May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."

Jesus didn't say that he *felt* forsaken—he declared that he *was* forsaken. Now, we will never know exactly how all this happens. But pray we don't miss even the cosmic drama of this moment. The sky had darkened. The temple curtain was about to be torn in two. The earth would shake. The whole of God's creation shudders at this moment, and so should we.

Because Jesus, there on the cross, took upon himself our sins. And when Jesus does that, he also takes upon himself the dreadful consequences of those sins—which is death, the experience of God's justice, God's turning away. The prophet Isaiah declared, "Your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he does not hear" (Isaiah 59:2).

Make no mistake about it: God loves us, and God absolutely loved his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. But God's attitude toward sin does not change. God cannot and will not allow sin to go unpunished. And so it happened that Jesus, who knew no sin, became sin. As he became sin's atoning sacrifice, he paid the price of forsakenness—which is to say that his was not just a physical death. No—Jesus felt in his soul the despair that would have otherwise been ours.

John Calvin put it like this: "If Christ had died only a bodily death, it would have been ineffectual. Unless his soul shared in the punishment, he would have been the Redeemer of bodies alone."

Praise be to God that—by grace and through faith—our spirits will never have to relate to what Jesus went through on the cross. We will never have to know the anguish of not being able to see God face to face.

But that doesn't mean that sin is something we no longer have to deal with. Nor does it mean that we will not experience, from time to time, feelings of earthly forsakenness.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning, Hagar and Ishmael are forced to leave Abraham and the rest of their family. They are forced to start over, and for a moment, it seemed that their fate was sealed. In their journey, Hagar ran out of water, and she couldn't provide for Ishmael anymore. So she allowed him to rest in the shade of a bush, and then she went a ways off so that she wouldn't have to watch him die.

But the Bible tells us that God heard Ishmael's voice and rescued him and his mother by directing Hagar to a well of water. And so it came to pass that Ishmael, being a child of Abraham—though he would not be a part of God's promised Israel—would nevertheless become a nation of his own.

Now, the God who did that—who did not let forsakenness have the last word—was the same God who, on the cross, was working out a plan for our redemption.

You see, without Christ, and whether we realize it or not, we too are like Ishmael. We are making our way in the wilderness, finding shade wherever we can, but ultimately, we do not have the capacity to change what is for us a set of sinful circumstances. We might as well be dying of thirst.

This is where we sometimes get confused about God's unconditional love. We affirm God's providential love for us and our love for God, but we stop short of acknowledging our need for repentance. When we do that, we lessen the significance of grace—we cheapen it.

The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against "cheap grace," the idea that we can have forgiveness without repentance, communion without confession, blessing without transformation. "Cheap grace," he said, "is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

Someone described cheap grace as being like a man who received the gift of a lifetime membership to a gym. It was a state-of-the-art facility, with all the newest and best equipment and the very best trainers. The man was ecstatic, and he told everyone about it. He flashed his fancy membership card from time to time and

even wore the gym t-shirts—but he never actually went to the gym. Years later, he wonders why he is so out of shape and unhealthy. “I thought being a member of the gym would change my life!”

We are left to wonder if he was ever really a member of the gym to begin with, because nothing about his inward life seemed to suggest that he was. There was never any change.

God’s grace is free, but the cost of discipleship is expensive. In fact, it costs us everything—because nothing is more valuable.

To see God face to face, to receive the richness of our spiritual heritage—that was the purpose for which Jesus was forsaken, so that we wouldn’t be. But part of receiving God’s grace is acknowledging our desperate need of it.

At the end of the Season of Lent, we arrive at Easter—and that is where we learn that forsakenness does not mark the end of the story of Jesus. His forsakenness ultimately led to resurrection. In that sense, forsakenness never has the last word.

The Psalm that Jesus knew in his bones—the one he referenced when he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”—comes from Psalm 22. In that Psalm, things seem hopeless. They seem forsaken. But those are not the last words of the Psalm.

At the end of the Psalm, we read this: “Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.”

I don’t know about you, but when I think about that Psalm—about those people yet unborn who would say that he has done it—I can’t help but gravitate to what was said by that Roman Centurion, a Gentile, who, after Jesus cried out and breathed his last, said, “Truly, this man was God’s Son.”

The righteousness of God could be declared because Jesus did what he said he would do. He suffered the turning of God’s face from him so that God would never have to turn his face from us.

The Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 4:6, “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

The gift of God’s grace on the cross shined a light on the true wages of sin. It exposed them for the true forsakenness they bring. And the light that shone—the Gospel of Jesus Christ—made clear the way our feet should go. Grace is that lamp unto our feet, that light unto our path.

Our journey of faith is not without troubles, but God promises in times of trouble to be our refuge and our strength. To the church persecuted, he promises that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And to the frail and human heart, he says this: “I will never leave or forsake you.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.