

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Many of us have asked that question at some point in our lives. We may not have used the word ‘forsaken,’ or phrased it just this way. We may have said, “God, where are you?” or “How long, Lord?” Or “Why did this happen?” Or simply, “Why?” We’ve all asked “Why” about something, and we may never get the answer to that question.

We don’t usually use the word “Forsaken” that much these days. We use words like “Abandoned,” “Deserted,” or “Rejected.” So, if we insert those words into this phrase, it would sound like this: “God, why have you abandoned me? Why have you deserted and rejected me?” That should cause us to raise an eyebrow about what is going on here. Jesus is doing God’s will by going to the cross, so why would God abandon Jesus? God brought him this far. Why would he desert him now? I mean, Did God really forsake Jesus? Was Jesus really separated from God – even for a short time? This final word from Jesus, this question, leaves us with a lot of questions to ponder.

Let us remind ourselves the timing of this question. Jesus was on the cross for about six hours, beginning around 9:00 in the morning until about three in the afternoon. The first three “words” seem to have been spoken in the early hours, but the last four seem to come near the end of his suffering.

These words give us a glimpse into the process throughout Jesus’ time on the cross. First, he asks God to forgive them, then he tells the man next to him, that he would be with him in Paradise, and then he gives Mary and John to each other to care

for each other. Even though he is suffering, Jesus is still taking care of everyone around him. But, today, with this “word,” we see a shift.

There’s a tension here, between the recent past and the not yet. If you recall during one of Jesus’ prayers, he asks, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). God doesn’t take the cup from him. Jesus has accepted that this is God’s will, and he is ready for it to come to pass. He has completed his work here and is ready for God to take him. He is calling for God to end his suffering. But he finds himself in that excruciating waiting period, that feeling of being in limbo.

Have you ever been in this place? We realize a hard journey lies ahead of us, and we accept it. There’s no getting out of it or around it. So, we begin the journey, follow the rules, do what we’re supposed to do, and then over time our will begins to waver. We’re ready to just be done with it, but the time seems to linger on and on. We feel stuck right in the middle, and there’s no end in sight. We cry out, “God, where are you?” “How much longer, Lord?” “Why have you forsaken me?” This word shows us that Jesus is truly suffering. It shows us that he was human, and he understands our human suffering.

Some think this phrase has a deeper theological meaning. If Jesus asked God why have you abandoned me, then there must have been a separation. That God did separate himself from Jesus for a short time. Because sin separates us from God, when Jesus took on our sins on the cross, God was forced to turn his back on him. The spiritual

pain of being distant from God caused Jesus to cry out.

I don't believe that God abandoned Jesus. God was there all along. We have that promise in scripture. Sin does distance us from God, and Jesus felt that distance. Jesus experienced for the first time a dark night of the soul.

"A dark night of the soul" is a term that St. John of the Cross, a 16th century Christian mystic, coined. He was a priest in the Carmelite order and was imprisoned when he tried to reform the order back to its primitive roots. He experienced a hellish time in prison, was tortured, and lost all his material possessions and social standing. He had nothing left but God. Yet, he stared out a small window in his cell to catch a glimpse of God through the sunlight and moonlight. He kept searching for God even through his suffering.

Many people think the term "a dark night of the soul" refers to the dark times in life when one experiences trials or a spiritual depression, in which one is questioning God. But that really wasn't what John of the Cross meant in his writing. A dark night of the soul is a spiritual experience, but it is when all the darkness within us is emptied in order to be in union with God. God's presence is often felt in the distance until we rid ourselves of sin and selfishness and only seek God's goodness and love. Then, we feel God's presence near.

When Jesus took on our sin, he felt a brief separation and the pain was unbearable. He cried out to God, in that dark moment, in that time of limbo, ready to be unified with God once again. When we find ourselves in a dark night, the darkness we feel in that moment, is just a feeling.

Our feelings can be very persuasive, but trust that God has not abandoned us. He is waiting for us to do the work we need to do, in order to be unified with him once again.

If you are in a dark night of the soul right now, hold on to the invisible God. He is there, even if you don't feel God's presence right now. Do the work, empty yourself, seek goodness, seek God.

But, how do we do this? Here are some specific things to do to move from the dark night to true transformation with God.

- Be patient and remind yourself this is only a small moment in your life.
- Remind yourself that feelings aren't always reliable. Hold on to the truth in scripture that says God is with us.
- Keep on being faithful to God. Don't let your anger or frustration take you further away from God.
- Maintain your relationship with God by reading scripture, praying, going to church, worshipping, serving, and connecting with your spiritual family. They can reassure you of God's love and presence.
- Take care of your physical and mental health as well. Sometimes a hike or talking to a counselor is what you need to feel God's presence again.

If you understand that "the dark night of the soul" is a time to rid yourself of sin in order to be unified with God, then this momentary distance is a good thing. Jesus went through it, so he could be reunited with God and so can we.

Gracious and Loving God, we want to be in your presence all the time. We long for your peace and unconditional love. When we allow ourselves to stay in sin and we don't feel your loving peace, we panic. We beat our heads against the wall trying to figure out why you left us, and how long we have to endure this pain. Our flailing actions cause us to drift further away. We long to be unified with you. Show us the sin in our lives that we need to confess, that we need to change. Show us how to empty ourselves so that we can be transformed by your grace. On this third Sunday of Lent, we are beginning to waver. Give us strength to continue through this time of waiting, to continue on this journey to the cross. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.