The Last Words of Jesus – What Did He Really Say and Mean?

This is the fundamental thing, the most serious thing of all, that we are always in the presence of God
—D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Read: Matthew 27, John 19, then Psalms 22, 23 and 24

What if?
What if we could somehow transport a typical Western thinking evangelical Christian in a time-machine back to the First Century to stand at the foot of the Cross on “Good Friday”? Wouldn’t it be fascinating to ask him or her how he or she would have understood the last words of Jesus?

My God, My God, why has thou forsaken Me?
—Matthew 27:46 and Psalm 22:1

It is finished.
—John 19:30 and Psalm 22:31b

Most likely we would have heard an interpretation something like this: “There is Jesus on the Cross carrying all the sins that were, are, and ever will be. It is such a hideous sight to a holy God that the Father turns His back on His only Son and abandons Him (for a day or two?)” Most likely he or she would have arrived at such interpretive reasoning in a similar fashion as this: “It must be that God abandoned His Son. After all, isn’t that what the text says?” Let’s overlook for a moment some of the theological implications of this perspective, e.g., does God have a back? How can an omnipresent God ever be away from His Son? Is it true that God cannot look upon sin or is He looking at sin all the time? Perhaps pondering those inconsistencies might prompt us to ask, “Is there another way to understand the last words of Jesus?”

It’s a First-Century Remez

In the first century, an observant Jew would have understood the last words of Jesus as found in Mark and Matthew, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,¹ as a remez back to Psalms 22, 23 and 24, not as a
statement that God had somehow “turned His
back” on Jesus and thereby “abandoned” His Son.

Remez is a Semitic word meaning “hinted
meaning” or a harkening back to something
that needs no further elaboration because the
hearers all know its obvious context. Since most
first-century observant Jewish young men had
memorized the Hebrew Scriptures at the local
synagogue school as part of their childhood
education, rabbis were able to speak and teach in
this remez (shorthand) manner because everyone
knew the complete (longhand) version of the
portion of Scripture being referenced.

Today’s Remez
We are all familiar with this remez communica-
tion technique. If I were to burst into song and
start singing “God bless America, land that I
………., and then suddenly stop, you could continue
the song because almost everyone knows how to
finish it. That would be a contemporary remez.
The same would be true of the opening phrase of
The Lord’s Prayer. All someone has to do is start
by saying, Our Father who art in Heaven …., and
we all know how to continue it.

Words as Remez
The use of remezim (plural) is common in Jewish
literature. It is also a common literary form used
by the Gospel writers. In fact, remez words and
phrases occur over 270 times in the Gospels.
Mary’s Magnificat and Zechariah’s Benedictus are
best understood as a cascade of remez. Jesus used
remez to signify who He was. For example, Son of
Man in Luke is a messianic harkening back to
the much fuller meaning of that title in Daniel 7.
Daily bread in The Lord’s Prayer is a remez back
to daily manna in the wilderness of Zin.

Actions as Remez
Likewise, many of Jesus’ actions would have been
understood by first-century observant Jews to be
in this remez genre, e.g., walking on the water in
Matthew was a remez back to Job 9:8, writing in
the sand in John 8 when they brought to Jesus
the woman caught in adultery is best understood
as a remez back to Jeremiah 17:13 (those who turn
away from you will be written in the dust). Jesus
bringing the just-died son of the widow of Nain
back to life was a remez back to Elisha who did
the same thing in essentially the same place with
a Shunammite woman.

Riding a donkey down into the Kidron
Valley from Bethphage on Palm Sunday would
have been understood by many in the crowd that
day as a double remez back to Zechariah 9:9 as
well as to Solomon who did the same thing when
he became king centuries earlier.7 Understanding
this literary form of remez can be very helpful in
understanding the original meaning of a passage.
That’s one reason why we have a teaching
module on this subject in our “Bible Alive,”
contextual immersion teaching weekends where
we teach people to engage the Bible in its
color.

A Parting Remez
Jesus is a rabbi and is teaching and speaking in
a Semitic dialect as a rabbi even to his dying
breath. As previously noted, observant Jews
standing around the cross would have understood
Jesus’ last utterance, My God, My God, why have
you forsaken me, as an intentional remez back to
Psalm 22:1. Likewise, It is finished (completed,
ended, accomplished) in John 19:30 is a remez
reference back to the very last phrase in Psalm
22. Fascinatingly, Jesus bookends Psalm 22 with
remezim references to the first and last phrases of
that Psalm. To the best of my knowledge, this
occurs nowhere else in Scripture. That is strongly
suggestive that Jesus may well have intended a
remez understanding of His last words by refer-
cencing Psalm 22 twice!
In the first century Jewish mind, Psalms 22, 23 and 24 were viewed as “the shepherd Psalms” of David, and thus as a unitized whole to their way of thinking. Thus, Jesus would have been understood as invoking the totality of those three Psalms as His final prayer by invoking Psalm 22:1 (note that some did not clearly hear what Jesus said and mistook eloi as Elijah – both are phonetically very similar in Semitic pronunciation). In doing so, Jesus identified Himself one more time as the Messiah in how He would die (Ps. 22), stated His hope and trust in His ever-present Father (Ps. 23), and envisioned His triumphant return to heaven (Ps. 24) in this progression of the Good Shepherd (Ps. 22), the Great Shepherd (Ps. 23), and the Chief Shepherd (Ps. 24) Psalms.

Reading these three Psalms from Jesus’ perspective can take your breath away. For example, Psalm 23:4, Lo, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death… thou art with me. From the perspective of Psalm 22:24, Jesus is affirming His confidence that …neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto Him, he heard. This echoes the reassurance Jesus gives His disciples in John 19:13 that the father is with Me. On the Cross, Jesus identified with those three shepherd Psalms of David and claimed them for His own long before we did.

The Wrong Conclusion

Why does this matter? Because Passion Week often gives rise to those traditional sermons and homilies that go something like this: There is Jesus on the Cross bearing all the sins that ever were, and ever will be. It is such a horrible sight that a Holy God turns His back on His Son, thus breaking fellowship with Jesus, and that “abandonment” of Jesus by God is the real agony of Calvary.

We need to remember that to a Holy God, it’s not the amount of sin that is the issue! In Job, God goes eye-ball to eye-ball with Satan. Looking upon sin and evil is not contradictory to God’s Holy nature. What God cannot do is look favorably upon sin. That was part of Jesus’ agony – His Father no longer looked upon Him fondly as the beloved, but with infinite wrath. But that’s not the same thing as a rupturing of The Eternal Oneness of the Godhead.

If you view the last words of Jesus absent the first-century literary context of remez, your only choice is to conclude that it must be that the Father somehow “abandoned” His Son, even though that conclusion would stand in conflict with all the rest of the Scriptures. God must have abandoned His Son, so this Greek-thinking logic goes, despite what Acts 2:27 says, For David said about Him… because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let Your Holy One see decay. Other verses that could also be cited include Heb 13:5 and Dt. 31:6.

Why is this important? Because there are Muslims who use the traditional evangelical teaching of “abandonment” on the Cross as proof that Jesus really was separated from God, and therefore cannot be considered to be One with God. Said yet another way, if God really did “abandon” His Son, then the Eternal Trinity wouldn’t be Eternal would it? It would no longer be an “indivisible essence.” Using that “abandonment” reasoning, the inseparability of the Godhead would have had to be broken at some moment during Passion Week!

Understanding “Forsaken”

As if these perspectives are not compelling enough, consider the contextual understanding of forsaken. All throughout the Psalms, when forsaken is used it is never in a context where...
God is somehow removing His presence. Rather, *forsake* has to do with the Psalmist feeling that God seems to be letting one of His own fall into the hands of His enemies (for His own purposes until He deems it time for rescue). That is a far different issue from that of God removing His Presence from the Psalmist. That Jesus fell into the hands of His enemies for a moment is certainly true. In His humanity, He may have even felt like He had been abandoned. But that did not mean that He was actually abandoned. Furthermore, in His Divinity, Jesus could not have been separated from the Godhead. Only Divinity could pay the perfect price God’s ransom required and being separated from God at that moment would have negated Jesus’ Divinity.

As you might gather, in understanding the last words of Jesus from the perspective of a first-century remez, it is difficult to conclude that the Father somehow “abandoned” Jesus because of His hideous sinful condition as He hung upon the Cross. That He endured unspeakable anguish and agony as He absorbed God’s judgmental wrath (in God’s presence) toward sin is certainly true. Think about it for a moment. Relationally speaking, the hardest thing to do is to absorb the justifiable wrath of another being directed at you while in his or her presence. It is at those kinds of moments that we all wish we could be as far away as possible from the person giving vent to that wrath! As payment for what we deserve, Jesus drained every last ounce of God’s infinite wrath toward sin while in God’s presence and then died on the Cross so that we would never have to absorb the wrath in God’s presence that we deserve. Therein lays the ultimate agony of Calvary for Jesus.

**Limits to Our Comprehension**

In approaching our comprehension of what happened on the Cross, as well as what happened after Jesus uttered the first and last phases of Psalm 22, we need to realize that we approach Holy ground. We need to also realize that we reach the limits of our abilities to comprehend it all and run out of words to even try to describe it. As Westerners we seem to have this proclivity to always want to use our most eloquent words and best examples to try and describe the indescribable while the Hebrew mind is simply content just to stand in awe. We need to allow room for the mystery that will always be intrinsic to the Godhead and its Trinitarian interrelationships and realize we can only approximate fathoming the Holy anger of God and the cosmic pain of Jesus as He bears our sins.

**Assurance**

The last words of Jesus actually stand as an assurance that God will never abandon His own. His Father’s care is constant and His presence is always with us even when we walk through our own “valley of the shadow of death,” even when we may feel forsaken in the midst of our own “valley” experiences. The efficacy of Calvary in atoning for our sins has always been rooted in the blood! It is the shed blood of Jesus that atones for our sins, not any God-turning-away-from-Jesus sense of “abandonment” even if that were somehow possible.

Scriptural misunderstandings can arise when we approach the text like Hellenistic Greeks, reading words without understanding their cohesive context – the language they were first spoken in, the literary form being used, and the genre of the communication technique being employed! As Dr. Kenneth Bailey has observed, restoring the context of the Scriptures often allows us “to rescue biblical truth from the familiar.”

This is certainly true when it comes to the last words of Jesus!
Reflections to Journal and Share

• What did you learn about God in Jesus’ last words?

• What surprised you in this passage when it was put back into its original context?

• What comforts you in this passage?

• What difference does context make in your understanding and appreciation of Calvary?

Ponder

When you next ponder Passion Week, take some time to read and carefully ponder Psalms 22, 23 and 24. Consider them to be an inseparable threesome (just like the Trinity) being invoked by Jesus as His final prayer. Doing so will not only take your breath away but will further deepen your praise and gratitude for what He eternally did for you that momentous day.
Jesus called out with a loud voice, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. When he had said this, he breathed his last.

—Luke 23:46

But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.

—John 16:32

Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

—Deuteronomy 6:4

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

—Psalm 139:7-8

A man may hide God from himself, and yet he cannot hide himself from God.

—William Secker

Visual Resources
For some very helpful visuals that make the crucifixion and death of Jesus come contextually alive, see the “Final Days” images in Preserving Bible Time’s Overview of the Gospels DVD, particularly the images in the “Death of Jesus” section.

Notes and Sources
1Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34
4Luke 11:3
5Luke 7:11-17
6II Kings 4:34-35
7I Kings 1:32-40
9Matthew 27:47; Mark 15:35
13Psalms 9:9-10; 37:28-29, 71:10-11