

"Why Have You Forsaken Me"

Isn't About Abandonment

Overview

The cry “Why have you forsaken me?” is the opening line of Psalm 22. The same psalm states in verse 24 that God did not hide his face. Almost nobody reads past the first verse. Matthew 27:46 records the most weighty cry in scripture. This study walks through the verse word by word in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek. Σαβαχθάνι (Sabachthani), the word Jesus actually spoke, comes from a root that conveys purposeful leaving rather than rejection. The Hebrew word אָזַב (azab) in Psalm 22:1 means “to leave” and “to let go” before it means “to forsake” or “to abandon”. The Greek ἐγκαταλείπω (egkataleipō), the verb the Gospel writer chose, appears one more time in the New Testament, in the strongest negation the language allows. After you understand this, the crucifixion of Jesus stops sounding like rejection and starts sounding like the first line of a psalm that answers itself.

Summary

The phrase “God turned His face away” does not appear in any verse of the Bible. Its most familiar phrasing comes from Stuart Townend's 1995 hymn How Deep the Father's Love for Us. The most often cited proof text, Habakkuk 1:13, is the prophet speaking to God in complaint, not God describing his own nature. Sabachthani derives from the Aramaic root שְׁבַק (shebaq), meaning to leave, to forsake, to allow, or to permit. The Hebrew word azab is translated as "forsake" 129 times by the King James and as "leave" 72 times. The root carries the sense of loosening a grip. Psalm 22 runs 31 verses. Verses 2–21 contain precise details of the crucifixion written a thousand years before the event. Verse 24 reverses the cry: he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, neither hath he hid his face from him. Egkataleipo is the Greek verb in Matthew 27:46, defined as to abandon, to desert, to leave in straits. The same verb appears in Hebrews 13:5, wrapped in five Greek negatives across two verbs, the strongest possible negation in koine Greek. In this reading, the cry maps to the felt experience of total separation. The sequence that follows reads as evidence that the source never left.

An Examination of the Text

The psalm Jesus quoted on the cross says God never turned His face away. Psalm 22:24 states it plainly, "For He has not despised nor scorned the suffering of the afflicted; Nor has He hidden His face from him; But when he cried to Him for help, He heard" (NASB). That is not

commentary; that is the text. The very psalm everyone cites as proof that God abandoned Jesus contains a verse that says the exact opposite.

Matthew 27:46, "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?" This verse carries more weight than almost any other in the Bible. People have wept through it, prayed it in hospital rooms, sung it on Good Friday with tears on their faces, and built their understanding of the entire cross around six English words. That weight is real, and it absolutely deserves to be honored. And every single time, someone told them the same thing: God could not look at sin, so He turned away from His own Son.

But three things about this verse do not add up:

1. This sentence is the opening line of Psalm 22. It's not an original cry. It's a quotation from a psalm that runs 31 verses, and almost nobody reads past the first verse.
2. The word translated as "forsaken" is not Hebrew; it is Aramaic. The word Jesus used is *σαβαχθάνι* (sabachthani). It does not mean what you were told it does!
3. The phrase "God turned His face away" does not appear in any verse of the Bible. Not once in the Old Testament. Not once in the New Testament.

Its most familiar phrasing comes from a worship song written in 1995. Notice that this is one psalm that answers its own question. One Aramaic word flattened into something it never said. One hymn that wrote the theology for millions. And a Greek verb that appears one more time in Scripture, where God uses it to promise the exact opposite. By the end of this section, you will know the full psalm, not just the first line. And "forsaken" will never sound the same.

Before we open the psalm, we need to trace the origin of the popular reading, because it does not come from the text. Ask any church in the English-speaking world what this verse means, and you will hear the same answer. God is too holy to look upon sin. When Jesus took upon Himself the sins of the world, the Father turned His face away. That interpretation has been preached from pulpits for generations, printed in study Bible margins, and has shaped how hundreds of millions of Christians understand the most important moment in their faith. But where does this actually appear in Scripture?

The verse people point to is Habakkuk 1:13, "Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You cannot look on wickedness with favor." Ask yourself, "Who is speaking?" It is not God describing Himself. That is the prophet Habakkuk, confused and frustrated, asking God why wicked nations are allowed to prosper. He is describing what he thinks God should do, not what God has declared about His own nature. That is a complaint, not a doctrine! No verse in the entire Bible records God saying He cannot be present where sin exists. If that were true, the incarnation could not have happened. Jesus touched lepers, ate with tax collectors, and entered every broken room in Judah. God was present throughout it all. So, where did "God turned His face away" actually come from?

In 1995, the songwriter Stuart Townend¹ wrote the hymn "How Deep the Father's Love for Us." It became one of the most widely sung worship songs in the Western church and appears in at least eight major hymnals. Congregations around the world have sung it on Good Friday for nearly thirty years. Unfortunately, it contains one line that changed how millions understand the cross: "The Father turns His face away." That is not Scripture; it is only a lyric. A beautiful, well-intentioned lyric, but one that traveled from a song sheet into the theology of an entire generation.

Now look at the word itself: σαβαχθάνι (sabachthani). This is not Hebrew. It is Aramaic, the everyday spoken language of first-century Galilee. It comes from the root שָׁבַק (shebaq), listed under Strong's number H7662. Standard lexicons define it as "to leave, to forsake, to allow, to permit." But the Aramaic carries a shade that English *flattens* completely. In Aramaic, there are stronger words for rejection, words that carry the sense of disgust, of throwing something away because you no longer care. Some Aramaic scholars have pointed to roots that carry the sense of disgusted abandonment, the severing of a relationship because one party has given up. But shebaq is not that. Within its broader semantic range, shebaq can carry the sense of leaving for a purpose. Releasing. Permitting something to unfold. The standard meaning includes "forsake." But even within that standard meaning, the texture is a purposeful departure, not a disgusted rejection.

Jesus did not use the harshest Aramaic word available to Him. He used shebaq. The error is that the English word "forsaken" conflates the two words into one. The hymn added, "turned His face away." The distance between the Aramaic word and the sermon grew wider than the distance between the cry and the answer, because the answer lies within the psalm itself. It has been sitting there for three thousand years! If the hymn did not write this theology and the proof text does not hold, what does the psalm itself actually say?

Remember that Psalm 22 is not a cry of despair. It is a psalm with two movements. Yet no one who quotes the first verse ever seems to reach the second. The opening is verse one, which says, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my help are the words of my groaning." The Hebrew word translated "forsaken" here is אָזַב (azab, Strong's number H5800). The standard definition in Brown, Driver, and Briggs is broader than most people realize. "To leave. To forsake. To loose." The King James Version translates azab as "forsake" 129 times. But it also translates the same word as "leave" 72 times. And twice it translates it as "help." The root carries the sense of loosening a grip or releasing a hold, not necessarily rejecting.

Now look carefully at how the verse uses it. Verse one is a question, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" That is not a declaration or a final verdict delivered to an empty sky. It is a question addressed to someone the speaker still trusts enough to call "My God." That question deserves an answer, and the psalm provides one. Verses 2–21 are the descent, the mockery, and

¹ Stuart Townend (born 1963) is a prominent English Christian worship leader and songwriter best known for composing widely sung contemporary hymns like "In Christ Alone" (co-written with Keith Getty) and "How Deep The Father's Love For Us"

the isolation. Bones are poured out like water. The heart melts like wax, the tongue sticks to the jaw, and dogs surround. The hands and feet are pierced, garments are divided, and lots are cast for clothing. Every detail of the crucifixion is here, laid out in precise order, written a thousand years before it happened. The azab of this psalm is real suffering. For anyone who has walked down their own dark valley, this psalm does not need explanation. It needs recognition. The descent is honest. It does not pretend the pain is not there. But then something shifts.

Verse 22 changes everything, "I will proclaim Your name to my brothers; In the midst of the assembly, I will praise You." The tone reverses completely. The cry becomes a song, and it keeps building. Next comes verse 24, the verse nobody preaches: "For He has not despised nor scorned the suffering of the afflicted; Nor has He hidden His face from him; But when he cried to Him for help, He heard." He has NOT hidden His face from him. The psalm that opens with "Why have you forsaken me?" contains its own answer. God did not hide His face; He heard the cry. The subjective experience of abandonment was real, but actual abandonment was not. Then verse 27 expands the scope beyond a single person, declaring, "All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will worship before You." And the final line in verse 31, "They will come and will declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He has performed *it*." *He has performed this*. That same declaration echoes across the Gospels.

In John 19:30, Jesus speaks His final word from the cross: "It is finished." The Greek word is τετέλεσται (tetelestai). Completed, Accomplished, Done. Additionally,

- Creditors would write tetelestai on debt certificates to indicate that a financial obligation was fully paid off.
- It was used to indicate that a prison sentence or legal penalty had been fully served, thereby freeing the individual from further condemnation.
- It served as a declaration that the battle had been won in full and the enemy definitively conquered.

Thus, the psalm that begins with a cry ends with a declaration of completion. The cross that begins in darkness ends with "It is finished." The arc is identical. The psalm answered its own question before the question was ever asked on the cross. If the psalm answers itself and the Aramaic word carries purpose, why did the Greek translator choose the specific word he used for "forsaken"? And what happens when you find that same word elsewhere in the New Testament?

When the Gospel writer translated the Aramaic sabachthani into Greek, he used the word ἐγκαταλείπω (egkataleipō, Strong's number G1459). Thayer's lexicon defines it plainly as "To abandon. To desert. To leave in straits. To leave helpless." That sounds final and like proof that the abandonment reading is correct. That is, until you find the same word one more time in the New Testament. Hebrews 13:5, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." The word translated "forsake" in that promise is the exact same Greek verb: egkataleipō. The same word, in the same entry on the same lexicon page. But the writer of Hebrews did not simply use the word. He packed the sentence with five Greek negatives spread across two verbs, "leave" and "forsake."

That is the strongest form of denial in the language. There is no stronger way to say "absolutely never" in ancient Greek than to stack five separate negative particles into a single promise.

One of those two verbs is *egkataleipo*. Consider what that means. The same word used to describe the worst moment of the cross is the word God chose when He wanted to make an unbreakable promise of presence. He did not choose a different word, nor did He avoid the verb because of its association with the crucifixion. He reached for the exact same word and wrapped it in the strongest negation the language allows. The Bible uses the same word for the cry on the cross and for God's most emphatic promise that He will never do that very thing. This is not a contradiction. This is the text showing the distance between how the cross felt from the inside and what was actually happening on the outside. And Jesus Himself confirmed it the night before.

John 16:32, "Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me." *The Father is with me*. Consider the timing of that statement. This is not something Jesus said at the beginning of His ministry, when everything was going well. This is the night before the cross. The garden of Gethsemane is hours away. The arrest is coming: the trial, the scourging, and the nails. He knew exactly what the next day held, so it is not surprising that He sweated drops of blood. As the Creator of the human body, He knew better than anyone how much pain He would suffer. He also knew that He would cry out from Psalm 22. And with all of that in front of Him, He looked His disciples in the eye and said it plainly: "The Father is with me." Notice that three languages now say the same thing. The Aramaic carries *purpose* where the English carries *rejection*. The Hebrew psalm asks the question and answers it 23 verses later. This Greek verb appears in the cry and in the strongest promise of presence in the New Testament. If the cry was not abandonment, what was it?

To answer that question, we need to look at what happens immediately after the cry. Matthew 27:51, "And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split." A Roman centurion, a man who worshipped no God of Israel, looks at the scene and speaks the first confession, "Truly this was the Son of God." The sequence of events follows a pattern. First comes the cry, then the barrier is destroyed, and finally death is overcome. Then a man who never saw can suddenly see. That is *sabachthani*—a purposeful leaving, not rejection, but rather release. And *azab*, the loosening. The psalm that asks the question holds its answer 23 verses later. "He has not hidden his face" is *egkataleipo*. The same word that is in the cry is also in the promise. The text refuses to let you separate the experience of darkness from the certainty of presence.

Psalm 22 traces the same arc as the crucifixion scene, moving from anguish in verse one to a descent through verse 21. Then comes the turn in verse 22: Praise in the congregation, all nations remembering, and a generation not yet born hearing the declaration. "He has done this." The psalm does not end in the dark; the cross does not end in the dark. Every early reading of this text said the same thing. Augustine called the crucifixion "the evening sacrifice." Chrysostom said Jesus spoke from the psalm deliberately, bearing witness to the Old Testament and showing

He was of one mind with the Father. Not a single one of them taught that God literally abandoned His own Son.

The cry maps to the moment when awareness passes through total identification with suffering and separation. The dark night; the felt experience that the source is gone. What follows the cry is evidence that the source never left. The veil tears, the dead wake, and the outsider sees for the first time. This is not just information about the cross; it's a pattern, one you may recognize from your own life. The moment the darkness felt most complete was not the end. It was the passage through. For most of your life, you have read only the first verse of a 31-verse psalm. You inherited a reading that stopped at the cry and never arrived at the answer. A reading shaped more by a worship song than by the text it claimed to explain. A reading that told you God turned away, even though the psalm says plainly that He did not. That reading cost you the second half of the psalm. The half where the cry becomes a song. The half where the nations turn. The half where the final line echoes across the Gospels into the last breath on the cross.

Now you have the full psalm:

- You understand the Aramaic word that carries purpose, even though you were told there was only rejection.
- You know the Hebrew root meaning loosening, where you were told there was only loss.
- You know the Greek verb that makes the opposite promise using the strongest negation the language allows.

The darkness was real. The cry was real. And God was there.

If you have ever walked through a season so dark that God felt completely absent, if you have felt your own *sabachthani*, this psalm was written for you. Not just verse one, but all 31 verses. The cry is yours, but so is the answer, the turn, and especially the ending that says "He has done this." The next time the darkness comes and your own *azab* presses in, you will not stop at the first line. You can read through to verse 24 and find what was always there. He has not hid His face from you. When you cried to Him, He heard you. The psalm does not end where you were taught it ends. It **never** did! Now you will never read this verse the old way again.