

“Why hast thou forsaken me?”

- Part 2 -

Prepared by
Elder Dwight Burford
April 10, 2016

*And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, **My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?** ([Mark 15](#))*

Stephen’s dying requests provide us with valuable insight into Jesus’ concluding question on the cross, “*Why hast thou forsaken me?*”

*And they stoned Stephen; and he, calling upon God, said, **Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.** And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, **Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.** And when he had said this, he fell asleep. ([Acts 7:59,60](#))*

To place this contrast between the dying words of Stephen and those of Jesus in its proper context, it is important to keep in mind that **Jesus did not die on the cross to save any of us from a physical death.** Rather, in dying for our sins and rising from the dead, Jesus took away *the sting of death* and *the victory of the grave* which had awaited us all.

*So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. **O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?** The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. ([1Corinthians 15:54-58](#))*

It was this redemptive peace and power that Stephen experienced firsthand. As the first martyr in Christ’s church after our Lord rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, Stephen’ words plainly show that he had indeed gained victory over the *sting of physical death* and over the bondage of *spiritual death* through faith in his risen Lord. How do we know this? Stephen evidenced no hatred for those who murdered him. Rather, he sought their pardon before the throne of God’s mercy and grace. In the words of John, Stephen’s words show that he had *passed from death unto life*.

*Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you. **We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.** Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer; **and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.** Hereby perceive we the love of Christ, because he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. ([1John 3:13-16](#))*

In the death and suffering of Jesus we see God [drawing](#) the whole world unto Himself in [love](#). And those who are willing to be reconciled unto God, He [reconciles](#) them unto Himself through Jesus' work of redemption to present His church unto Himself as a people who are holy and without sin.

*For Christ also once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit, **that he might bring us to God.** ([1 Peter 3:18](#))*

*For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, **so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby;** and came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. **For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.** ([Ephesians 2:14-18](#))*

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. ([Ephesians 5:25-27](#))

Now let's look a little deeper at Jesus' question on the cross. Was it merely a display of His humanity? Was He simply showing His vulnerability or human weakness in that moment while dying a physical death? Or was His question of His heavenly Father a revelation to the world that something deeper, more profound? Exploring further we will see that what happened in that moment forever changed our relationship with God. Therefore, it will not do to take a superficial look into this question Jesus asked on the cross.

We do not need to guess or assume things about the particulars of Jesus' dying moments because we have the testimonies of many [eyewitnesses](#) attesting to the fact that Jesus knew exactly what awaited Him upon the cross ([Hebrews 12:1-3](#) & [Luke 24:32-47](#) with [Isaiah 53:11](#)). In fact, as John tells us, Jesus knew beforehand that He held **the power** to lay down His life and to take it up again according to the commandment of His heavenly Father ([John 10:17,18](#)). This power was not something He discovered along the way.

Although Jesus' disciples had not fully understood all that Jesus had been telling them about His death before it happened ([Mark 9:28,29](#)), they would later understand and testify openly that Jesus had known beforehand the pain and suffering that awaited Him in taking upon Himself the sins of the world. We have Matthew's witness that Jesus told His disciples He would suffer at the hands of the elders in Jerusalem ([Matthew 16:22](#)). We have Luke's witness of how at the appointed time Jesus expressed a great *desire* to eat the Passover meal with His disciples, revealing His desire to fulfill the meal that foreshadowed His atonement for sin ([Luke 22:15](#)). We also have the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke about Jesus pouring out His grief to His heavenly Father in a garden with His disciples nearby prior to being nailed to the cross ([Matthew 26:33-43](#), [Mark 14:36-47](#) & [Luke 40-46](#)).

Perhaps it is only natural to view the situation from our human perspective and to conclude that Jesus was most vulnerable in the moments before He died. Yet Luke tells us that when Jesus knew that the time had come for Him to atone for our sins, He “[steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.](#)” This imagery recorded by Luke reminds me of a particular teaching by Jesus in which He likened being His disciple to that of building a tower ([Luke 14:29-31](#)). In His lesson, Jesus spoke of the need to first *count the cost* before starting construction. This I am convinced Jesus did Himself before going to the cross to provide the way for us to enter back into our heavenly Father’s presence.

From the beginning Jesus had *counted the cost* of our salvation and so prepared Himself from before the world was formed to pay the full price necessary to satisfy the justice of God so that His mercy could claim us ([John 1:1-33](#)). If this were not so, Jesus would have been a profound hypocrite in teaching us to *count the cost* if He had not done so in preparing Himself to take up His cross for our redemption.

As found in his record of Jesus’ ministry, John wrote of our Lord being *the Lamb of God who was slain from the foundation of the world* ([John 1:29](#) & [Revelation 13:8](#); cf. [Genesis 22:10](#)). John was in a good position to understand and convey this depiction of Jesus because, before going to the cross, Jesus plainly explained to John and the other disciples what would shortly befall Him. Why exactly did Jesus tell them beforehand? It was so that they might believe after all that Jesus had told them had come to pass.

And now I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe. ([John 14:29](#); cf. [Isaiah 42:9](#))

With his account of Jesus’ ministry, John showed that he and the other disciples did come to believe according to Jesus’ words ([John 20:30,31](#) & [I John 1:1-4](#); cf. [Luke 24:24-26](#)). History tells us that each of them went on to follow Jesus by taking up their own crosses (e.g. [Foxes Book of Martyr’s](#); cf. [Matthew 16:25-31](#) and [1 Peter 2:21-25](#)).

Jesus had foreknowledge of the events that took place in His life because He chose to take the path He did in order to bring about our salvation. He was not a victim. In the words of Arthur Oakman, [Jesus presided over His own execution](#). Still, one may question if in the moment Jesus was about to die, He was “most vulnerable?” If we were to so conclude, the question then becomes to what exactly was Jesus vulnerable such that His sense of vulnerability would cause Him to cry out in agony with a feeling of being forsaken or abandon?

In that moment Jesus was nearing physical death, a death that all of us will eventually experience just like those who have gone on before us. Was Jesus merely responding in a typical manner to persons nearing death? Was physical death the only thing that was influencing Him in the moment? If this is the line of reasoning we should pursue, would it not be fair to conclude also that in the moment of death everyone is similarly vulnerable? I suppose others may have cried out in a similar fashion over the years, but certainly not the majority of people, and especially not many, if any, of the condemned.

Consider Stephen at his death as an example ([Acts 7:59,60](#)). Just before he died a brutal death by stoning, Stephen said very similar things to those Jesus had spoken while on the cross. Like Jesus, Stephen asked God to forgive those who were in the process of killing him by asking that his death would not be laid to their charge (cf. [Luke 23:35](#)). And just before he died, like Jesus, Stephen committed his spirit unto his Lord (cf. [Luke 23:47](#)). However, Stephen did not express any of the anguish Jesus expressed about being forsaken or abandoned. Rather, Stephen passed into the Lord's presence in a much more peaceful way compared to Jesus' passing. So why didn't Jesus get to pass in a similarly (seemingly) peaceful way rather than in the horrible anguish we are told that He experienced? Was Stephen somehow better than Jesus, perhaps physically, morally, emotionally, intellectually, etc.? Definitely not, if the gospel is to be believed.

Both Jesus and Stephen suffered horribly before they died. Yet, from the accounts given of their deaths, Jesus appears more vulnerable than Stephen because of Jesus' expression of feeling forsaken and Stephen's complete lack of expressing any feeling of abandonment. But this clearly was not the case. Why? If Jesus had not suffered the anguish of eternal separation from His heavenly Father in that moment on the cross, Stephen would not have had the peaceful passing from this earth that he experienced. Jesus took the *sting* out of death so that those like Stephen who believe in Him might not suffer, but be raised unto everlasting life ([1 Corinthians 15:55-57](#)).

Remember, Jesus' death did not take away physical death for anyone. Each of us must and will die, whether it will be from old age, disease, an accident, etc. What then did Jesus' death accomplish? It accomplished something that Stephen's death and the death of other martyrs could not and did not accomplish. In the moment Jesus cried out in anguish, Jesus bore witness to the world that He experienced another death in that moment on the cross; a death that we all would have faced had not Jesus taken our place on the cross.

In the words of Isaiah, like a lamb, Jesus went to the *shearers* silently ([Isaiah 53:7](#)). He did not revile and accuse ([1 Peter 2:21-25](#)). Having the power to lay down His life and to take it up again, it is rather self-evident that Jesus also had the power to maintain His composure in death ([John 10:17,18](#)). Yet He chose to cry aloud, and in doing so, bore witness of His separation from His heavenly Father.

As I understand it, His was an expression that is akin to the weeping and wailing that those who are cast off from the presence of the Lord feel as spoken of by Matthew (see [Matthew 8:12](#), [Matthew 13:43](#), [Matthew 13:51](#), [Matthew 22:13](#), [Matthew 25:31](#), etc.). That is, Jesus cried out (i.e. wept and wailed) for us so that we would not have to undergo this experience.

It further helps to recall that there were two other men who died with Jesus ([Luke 23:33,34](#)). To the one on His right, Jesus said they would be together in paradise that very day; to the other man on His left, Jesus said nothing ([Luke 23:40-44](#)). If Jesus only experienced physical death in that moment, such composure on Jesus' part gives little room to assume or guess there was much vulnerability on His part that would have allowed for such an intense expression of anguish shortly after testifying of paradise to the thief to His right. Jesus knew where He would ultimately be after

passing from this life. Yet, He first had to drink the cup having the bitter dregs of God's judgment against sin ([Matthew 26:35,41](#), [Mark 14:38-47](#), [Luke 22:39-46](#); cf. [Psalm 75:7-8](#)).

It seems obvious that, compared to Jesus, no one holds a better or even a comparable understanding of death. This includes in that moment immediately preceding His physical death. Jesus had an appointment to vanquish both physical death and the spiritual death (an eternal separation from God) that awaited all mankind had Jesus not intervened.

To close for now, Jesus' death was no ordinary death. He did not commit suicide by the hands of unsuspecting participants. Neither did He accidentally fall into the hands of conspiring men and suffer needlessly. No! Jesus' death was purposed and prepared from time immemorial. And it accomplished so much more, infinitely more, than anyone could have hoped might have been accomplished by the combined deaths of all the martyrs who have ever lived. His death [satisfied the demands of justice](#) so mercy could be extended to us. Otherwise, we could not have been set free from the bondage of the death of the body and of the death of the spirit. It is because Jesus rose from the dead and now lives that we can rest assured He will *love us to the end*, for as it is written of Him, [He ever lives to make intercession for us](#).

*Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, **having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.*** ([John 13:1](#))

As a final note, what has drawn me closer to Jesus through this study is the knowledge that He went into this situation – of dying on the cross for us – with His eyes wide open. He did indeed take away the sting of death and the captivity of the grave by bearing these [enemies](#) for us.

*For he must reign, till he hath put **all enemies** under his feet. **The last enemy, death, shall be destroyed.*** ([1 Corinthians 15:25,26](#))

Therefore, may we hear Jesus' call to us to love one another as He has loved us by [following Him](#) in loves pathway of life and light:

Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me; and as I said unto the Jews, Whither I go, ye cannot come; so now I say to you. A new commandment I give unto you. That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. ([John 13:33-35](#))

As a postscript to this discussion, it is instructive to consider Paul, who witnessed Stephen's death. Stephen's dying words, as I understand it, helped Paul conclude that [to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord](#).