

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

CHRISTOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ

UNIT 7: THE ATONING WORK OF CHRIST

Lesson 23

The Cry of Dereliction

Forsaken for Us

“My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?” — The Most Profound and Mysterious Moment in All of History

Key Texts: Matthew 27:45–46; Psalm 22:1–24; Isaiah 53:10; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13

Christ Was Forsaken So That We Might Never Be Forsaken

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

SERIES VERSE

*“For we do not preach ourselves
but Christ Jesus as Lord,
and ourselves as your bond-servants
on account of Jesus.”*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5, NASB 1995

INTRODUCTION

There are moments in the Gospel narratives that resist the theologian's instinct to analyze and explain, that press past the interpreter's apparatus toward something darker and more profound than any framework can fully contain. The cry of dereliction is one of those moments, perhaps the most searching and the most terrible in all of Scripture. "About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'" (Matthew 27:46, NASB 1995). These words, uttered from the cross in the final hours before the death of the Son of God, are at once a quotation of Scripture (Psalm 22:1), a prayer addressed to God, and the most theologically profound declaration ever uttered by human lips. They are the atonement in its most concentrated, most explicit, most personally agonizing form.

The cry of dereliction is not a parenthetical detail in the passion narrative. It is the theological center of the cross, the moment at which the penal substitutionary atonement of Lessons 21 and 22 is expressed not in systematic formulation but in the anguished cry of the one who is bearing it. Everything that the previous lessons have established about the necessity of the atonement (the divine justice required satisfaction), the nature of the atonement (penal substitution), and the extent of the atonement (definite, for the elect specifically) is concentrated in this single cry. The Son of God is forsaken by the Father because He is bearing the sin of those for whom He died, experiencing in His own person the judicial abandonment that sin produces, the divine forsakenness that is the just consequence of the transgression He is bearing as the Substitute.

This lesson examines the cry of dereliction with the theological precision and the devotional reverence that it requires. It works through the immediate context of the cry, the Old Testament background in Psalm 22, the theological question of what the forsakenness means and does not mean, the relationship between the cry and the darkness of Matthew 27:45, the connection between the forsakenness and the penal substitutionary atonement, and the pastoral consolation that the cry of dereliction is designed to provide: Christ was forsaken so that those for whom He died might never be forsaken. The lesson does not resolve the mystery fully, and it would be theologically presumptuous to claim that it could. The cry of dereliction is the deepest point of the deepest event in the history of the universe; it is a place where the theologian stands at the edge of what the creature can understand and looks with reverence and awe into the depths of what the divine love was willing to bear.

I. THE CONTEXT: THE SIXTH TO THE NINTH HOUR

The Three Hours of Darkness and the Setting of the Cry

A. The Darkness from the Sixth to the Ninth Hour

The cry of dereliction does not arrive in the passion narrative without preparation. Matthew 27:45 sets the scene with three words that function as a cosmic commentary on what is happening on the cross: “Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour” (NASB 1995). The sixth hour was noon; the ninth hour was three o’clock in the afternoon. The darkness that fell at the moment of the sun’s highest point in the sky, the moment when, by all natural expectation, the light should have been at its most brilliant, and that persisted for three hours is not a natural meteorological event. It is a divinely ordained sign, a cosmic event that corresponds to the theological reality of what is happening at Golgotha.

The darkness echoes the ninth plague of Egypt (Exodus 10:21–22), when God sent three days of thick darkness over the land as a sign of divine judgment immediately preceding the final plague of the death of the firstborn. It echoes the darkness described by the prophets as a sign of the day of the Lord, the day of divine judgment: “It will come about in that day... that I will make the sun go down at noon and make the earth dark in broad daylight” (Amos 8:9, NASB 1995); “A day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness” (Joel 2:2, NASB 1995). Creation itself recoils as the judgment of God is poured out upon the sin-bearing Son. The three hours of darkness are the three hours during which the concentrated wrath of God against the sin of the elect is borne by the one who has taken their sin upon Himself. The darkness is not incidental; it is the visible, cosmic expression of the invisible, judicial reality that reaches its most explicit verbal expression in the cry of dereliction at the ninth hour.

B. The Cry Itself: ‘Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani’

The cry itself is given in the original languages, the Aramaic of everyday speech with the Hebrew opening of Psalm 22:1, both in Matthew 27:46 (“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?”) and in Mark 15:34 (“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”, reflecting the Aramaic more fully). The preservation of the original-language words in both accounts, alongside the translation provided by the evangelists themselves, signals the weight and the gravity of the moment: this is a cry that the evangelists do not merely report but transliterate, as if the specific sounds of the words demand preservation alongside their meaning. The cry is loud, Matthew 27:46 uses the word ἀνεβόησεν (‘cried out’) and the phrase φωνῇ μεγάλῃ (‘with a loud voice’): not the whisper of a dying man but the full-throated, anguished, deliberate cry of one who is making a declaration of ultimate significance. The one who cries out is not delirious, not confused, not merely expressing a physiological response to pain. He is praying, crying to God from the deepest possible depth of human desolation.

II. THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND: PSALM 22

The Psalm That Begins in Dereliction and Ends in Triumph

A. The Structure of Psalm 22

That Jesus cites Psalm 22:1 from the cross is not incidental. The entire Psalm 22 is the Old Testament's most detailed prophetic account of the passion, a first-person account of suffering and abandonment that anticipates the experience of the cross with extraordinary precision. The opening verse, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning" (Psalm 22:1, NASB 1995), establishes the experience of divine abandonment as the ground note of the entire psalm. The psalmist is not merely experiencing physical suffering or social rejection; he is experiencing the withdrawal of the divine presence, the sense that the God who has been the refuge of his fathers (vv. 4–5) and who was present from birth (vv. 9–10) has now turned away and left him in the extremity of his need.

The passion narrative details of Psalm 22 are too precise to be coincidental. Verse 7 ("All who see me sneer at me; they separate with the lip, they wag the head", NASB 1995) is fulfilled in Matthew 27:39–40 ("And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads"). Verse 8 ("Let him deliver himself; let him rescue him, because he delights in him") is fulfilled in Matthew 27:43. Verse 16 ("They pierced my hands and my feet", NASB 1995) anticipates the crucifixion. Verse 18 ("They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots", NASB 1995) is fulfilled in John 19:23–24. The physical details of the psalm, the bones out of joint (v. 14), the heart like wax (v. 14), the extreme thirst (v. 15), the encirclement of enemies (vv. 12, 16), are the details of the crucifixion described centuries before crucifixion was a Roman practice.

B. The Psalm Ends in Victory

The decisive feature of Psalm 22 for the theology of the cry of dereliction is not merely its prophetic description of suffering but its movement from dereliction to triumph. The psalm does not end in abandonment; it ends in vindication. Verses 22–24 record the transition: "I will tell of Your name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You. You who fear the Lord, praise Him... For He has not despised nor scorned the affliction of the afflicted; nor has He hidden His face from him; but when he cried to Him for help, He heard" (NASB 1995). The God who appeared to have forsaken the Sufferer has in fact heard his cry; the apparent forsakenness gives way to vindication and praise; and the promise that follows, "All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will worship before You" (v. 27, NASB 1995), is the eschatological scope of the triumph that the cry inaugurates.

When Jesus cites Psalm 22:1 from the cross, He is not merely expressing a moment of despair; He is applying the entire Psalm to His own experience, identifying Himself as the Sufferer of Psalm 22, the one who experiences the apparent divine abandonment and who will be vindicated in the end. The cry of dereliction is simultaneously the cry of genuine forsakenness (the experience of the ninth hour is real) and the prayer of the one who knows that God will hear (the Psalm that begins with 'why

have You forsaken me' ends with 'He heard'). The cry is not a cry of ultimate despair; it is the prayer of the God-forsaken Sufferer who remains in prayer even in the deepest darkness, addressing the God who seems to have abandoned Him as 'My God' even in the abandonment.

"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" | "For He has not despised nor scorned the affliction of the afflicted... but when he cried to Him for help, He heard."

MATTHEW 27:46; PSALM 22:24, NASB 1995

III. WHAT THE FORSAKENNESS MEANS: THE JUDICIAL ABANDONMENT OF THE SIN-BEARER

Not a Dissolution of the Trinity but the Relational Consequence of the Sin Being Borne

A. What the Forsakenness Does Not Mean

Before the positive theological account of the forsakenness can be given, certain misunderstandings must be excluded. The cry of dereliction does not mean that the ontological unity of the Trinity was broken at the cross, that the Father and the Son were separated in their divine being, that the Trinitarian relations were suspended, or that the Son ceased to be God or the Father ceased to love the Son. The love of the Father for the Son is eternal and immutable (John 17:24: "you loved Me before the foundation of the world"), and no event in time, not even the cross, alters the eternal Trinitarian relations. The ontological union of the Trinity was not disrupted at the cross.

Nor does the cry of dereliction mean that the Son was simply expressing a subjective emotional state of spiritual desolation that did not correspond to any objective change in His relationship with the Father, a kind of dark night of the soul in which He felt forsaken but was not actually so. This reading, sometimes proposed as a way of avoiding the difficulties of the judicial forsakenness, does not do justice to the reality and the weight of what the evangelists describe. The three hours of darkness, the specific cry, and the theological context established by the penal substitutionary atonement all point to a genuine objective reality, not merely a subjective experience of spiritual desolation, but the actual bearing of the judicial consequence of sin.

B. What the Forsakenness Does Mean: The Judicial Consequence of Sin-Bearing

The positive theological account of the forsakenness must be constructed from the specific nature of what Christ is bearing at the moment of the cry. He is bearing the sin of those He represents, not in the sense of having become morally sinful (2 Corinthians 5:21: 'He who knew no sin') but in the sense of bearing the legal status and the penal consequences of the sin that has been imputed to Him (Lesson 21). And the penal consequence of sin is not merely physical death; it is the judgment of God, the divine forsakenness that is the appropriate divine response to sin. Sin is, at its deepest level, the

creature's rejection of God; the creature who rejects God receives, in the end, what it has chosen: the absence of the God it rejected. The divine forsakenness is the judicial expression of the divine holiness: the God who cannot look upon sin withdraws His sustaining, blessing, comforting presence from the one bearing the sin.

What Christ experiences in the cry of dereliction is this judicial forsakenness, the relational withdrawal of the Father's sustaining, blessing, comforting presence from the Son who is bearing the sin of those He represents. It is not the dissolution of the ontological Trinitarian union; it is the withdrawal of the relational-covenantal dimension of the Father's presence from the Son who stands in the position of the sin-bearer. The Father does not cease to be the Father; but the covenantal blessing, the 'well-pleased' (εὐδόκησα, eudokēsa) of the baptism (Matthew 3:17), the warmth of the Father's love experienced in the intimate fellowship of the Trinitarian life, these are withdrawn from the Son at the moment of greatest need, precisely because the one bearing the sin of the world must experience what the sinner would have experienced without the Substitute: the God who turns His face away from sin.

B.B. Warfield's description is theologically precise and pastorally searching: the forsakenness of the cross is the 'spiritual death' that is the consequence of sin, not the cessation of consciousness or the annihilation of the person, but the withdrawal of the divine presence and blessing from the one who stands in the sinner's place. The physical death of the cross is the visible expression of the spiritual death that is the true horror of the penalty; and the cry of dereliction is the verbal expression of the spiritual death being undergone.

IV. THE FORSAKENNESS AND THE PENAL SUBSTITUTION: THE PROOF THAT THE PENALTY IS GENUINE

The Cry Is the Definitive Moment at Which the Penal Substitution Reaches Its Full Expression

A. Isaiah 53:10 and the Father's Initiative in the Forsakenness

Isaiah 53:10 provides the Old Testament's most direct statement of the divine initiative in the forsakenness of the cross: "But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief" (NASB 1995). The forsakenness of the ninth hour is not an accident of history or a consequence of human malice; it is the outworking of the divine purpose in redemption. The Father who "did not spare His own Son" (Romans 8:32) allows the Son to experience the full weight of the judicial consequence of the sin He is bearing, including the withdrawal of the divine presence that is the most crushing dimension of that consequence. The 'pleased' of Isaiah 53:10 is not the pleasure of cruelty but the pleasure of the divine will that achieves the redemption of the elect through the willing self-offering of the Son who bears their sin to its fullest judicial consequence.

Galatians 3:13 connects the cry of dereliction to the specific curse-language of Deuteronomy: Christ “became a curse for us” (NASB 1995). The curse of Deuteronomy 27:26 that falls upon everyone who does not keep the entire law, and the curse of Deuteronomy 21:23 that falls upon the one who hangs on a tree, both involve the withdrawal of the divine favor and presence from the cursed one. Christ bearing the curse of the law means Christ experiencing the full judicial consequence of the legal curse, including the forsakenness that the curse implies. The cry ‘why have You forsaken Me?’ is the experiential expression of what it means to bear the curse of the law in the place of those who were under it.

B. 2 Corinthians 5:21 and the Double Imputation of Dereliction

The connection between the cry of dereliction and the double imputation of 2 Corinthians 5:21 is direct and theologically illuminating. “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (NASB 1995). The one who ‘knew no sin’ is made to be sin; and the one made to be sin experiences, at the cross, the specific consequence that sin brings: the forsakenness of God. The logic is precise: if our sin has been imputed to Him and He is bearing it in our place, then He must experience the specific consequence that our sin would have produced for us if we had borne it ourselves. The most comprehensive consequence of sin is not physical death but the withdrawal of the divine presence, eternal separation from God. Christ experiences the temporal, intensified expression of this consequence on our behalf, so that we need never experience it ourselves.

The pastoral conclusion that follows from this connection is among the most personally consoling in the entire gospel: the cry of dereliction is the guarantee that no believer will ever face the divine forsakenness. The specific, judicial, covenantal-relational withdrawal of the Father’s presence from the sin-bearer at the ninth hour is the divine declaration that the penalty has been fully paid, the curse fully borne, and the forsakenness fully exhausted. Because Christ was forsaken there, in that moment, in that darkness, for those specific people, those people will never be forsaken. Hebrews 13:5 declares the promise with absolute certainty: “He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you’” (NASB 1995). The guarantee of the never-forsakenness of the believer is the forsakenness of the Substitute.

V. THE CRY AS PRAYER: ‘MY GOD, MY GOD’ IN THE DEEPEST DARKNESS

The Son Who Remains in Prayer Even in the Extremity of the Divine Abandonment

A. The Vocative ‘My God’ in the Darkness

One of the most theologically significant features of the cry of dereliction is often overlooked in the urgency to address its soteriological dimensions: the fact that it is a prayer. The cry is not a statement about God addressed to the bystanders; it is a cry addressed directly to God. “My God, My God” (Ἐλὶ Ἐλὶ, *Eli Eli*, or Ἐλωὶ Ἐλωί, *Eloi Eloi*) is a vocative, the direct address of a person to the one being called. Even in the extremity of the divine abandonment, even in the darkness, even under the full weight of the judicial forsakenness, the Son continues to pray. He does not cease to address God as God; He does not fall silent; He does not turn away from the Father He cannot feel. The double address ‘My God, My God’ is itself an act of faith in extremis: the possessive pronoun (‘My’) claims a relationship that the experience of forsakenness seems to deny.

This is the theology of the lament prayer in its most concentrated form. The Psalter’s lament tradition, which includes not only Psalm 22 but Psalms 13, 38, 42–43, 88, and others, is a tradition of prayer in the darkness, of crying out to a God who seems absent or silent, of maintaining the address to God even when the experience of God is one of withdrawal and absence. The cry of dereliction is the fulfillment of this tradition in the most extreme possible form: the incarnate Son of God, bearing the sin of the world and experiencing the judicial consequence of that sin-bearing, prays the prayer of dereliction with the full weight of the lament tradition behind Him. The one who utters this prayer is not merely a psalmist expressing personal spiritual desolation; He is the one whose experience of forsakenness is the deepest and most real that any creature has ever endured, and yet He prays.

B. The Model for Christian Lament

The cry of dereliction provides the christological ground and the hermeneutical key for the entire lament tradition of the Psalter as a resource for Christian prayer. When the believer is in the darkness of suffering, spiritual desolation, or the felt absence of God, they are not alone in that darkness, and they are not beyond the reach of prayer. The one who cried from the cross has been there before them, at the deepest possible point of the darkness, and He continued to pray. The believer who prays from the darkness is praying in the pattern of the one who prayed from the cross: maintaining the address to God, claiming the relationship (‘My God’) even when the experience seems to deny it, and crying out with honesty about the experience of apparent abandonment.

Hebrews 4:15 takes on its deepest dimension in the light of the cry of dereliction: “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (NASB 1995). The sympathizing High Priest has experienced the darkness of the felt absence of God in the most extreme form possible, not merely as a spiritual trial but as the judicial forsakenness of the sin-bearer. He knows from the inside what it costs to maintain faith and prayer in the darkness. And the invitation of Hebrews 4:16 to ‘draw near with confidence to the throne of grace’ is the invitation extended by the one who, in His own darkest moment, drew near to the Father through the prayer of the ninth hour.

VI. DOXOLOGICAL CONCLUSION: FORSAKEN SO WE MIGHT NEVER BE FORSAKEN

The cry of dereliction is the most theologically dense and the most personally searching utterance in all of Scripture. It is the moment at which the penal substitutionary atonement is expressed not in the language of systematic theology but in the language of suffering, prayer, and divine abandonment. It is the moment at which the love of God is displayed not in a proclamation of goodwill but in the willingness of the Son to bear the most crushing consequence of the human sin He has taken upon Himself: the withdrawal of the divine presence that is the ultimate expression of the divine judgment against sin.

The pastoral consolation of the cry of dereliction is specific, permanent, and grounded in the most objective possible reality. It is not the vague consolation that God is sympathetically aware of our suffering. It is the specific consolation that the one who was forsaken at the ninth hour was forsaken in the place of those He came to save, that the forsakenness was exhausted there, at that place, at that hour, in that darkness, and that the specific people for whom He was forsaken will never face the divine forsakenness themselves. Hebrews 13:5's absolute promise ("I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you") is grounded in the absolute forsakenness of the Substitute. The promise is as permanent as the completed cross. The darkness of the ninth hour will never fall again for those for whom it fell then.

The most honest response to the cry of dereliction is not explanation but worship, the prostrated, humbled, grateful worship of those who know that the darkness that should have been theirs was borne by Another, that the forsakenness that was the just consequence of their sin was exhausted by the one who bore it in their place, and that the God who turned His face away from the sin-bearer at the ninth hour now turns His face toward them in the full, unrestrained, permanent grace of those who have been justified through the one who cried. "For He has not despised nor scorned the affliction of the afflicted; nor has He hidden His face from him; but when he cried to Him for help, He heard" (Psalm 22:24, NASB 1995). God heard the cry, and the hearing was the resurrection. The cry of dereliction is not the final word; the empty tomb is. To Him who cried in the darkness and rose in the light, to Him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Key Texts: *Matthew 27:45–46; Mark 15:33–34; Psalm 22:1–31; Isaiah 53:10; Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 13:5; Hebrews 4:14–16; Amos 8:9; Romans 8:32*

THEOLOGICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Cry of Dereliction	The cry of Jesus from the cross in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34: 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?' (citing Psalm 22:1 in the original languages, Aramaic/Hebrew). Called 'dereliction' (from the Latin derelictio, 'abandonment') because it expresses the experience of divine abandonment. The cry is simultaneously: (1) a citation of Psalm 22:1, applying the entire psalm to the passion; (2) a prayer addressed directly to God, maintaining the address 'My God' even in the extremity of the forsakenness; and (3) the most explicit verbal expression of the judicial forsakenness that is the penal consequence of the sin being borne by the Substitute.
Judicial Abandonment	The specific theological description of the forsakenness of the cry of dereliction: not the dissolution of the ontological Trinitarian union (which is eternal and immutable) but the withdrawal of the relational-covenantal dimension of the Father's presence from the Son who stands in the position of the sin-bearer. The Father does not cease to be the Father; but the covenantal blessing, the 'well-pleased' of the baptism, the warmth of the Trinitarian fellowship, these are withdrawn from the Son who bears the sin of those He represents, because the one bearing the sin must experience what the sinner would have experienced without the Substitute: the God who turns His face away from sin. Distinguished from the subjective dark-night-of-the-soul interpretation (merely felt forsakenness without objective change).
The Darkness of the Ninth Hour	The three hours of supernatural darkness from the sixth hour (noon) to the ninth hour (3 p.m.) described in Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44. Not a natural meteorological event but a divinely ordained cosmic sign echoing: (1) the ninth plague of Egypt (Exodus 10:21–22: three days of darkness preceding the death of the firstborn); (2) the day-of-the-Lord darkness of the prophets (Amos 8:9: 'I will make the sun go down at noon'; Joel 2:2). The darkness is the visible cosmic expression of the divine judgment being poured out upon the sin-bearing Son: creation recoils as the concentrated wrath of God against the sin of the elect is borne at Golgotha.
Psalm 22 in the Passion	The psalm cited by Jesus in the cry of dereliction (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34), which is the Old Testament's most detailed prophetic account of the passion. The passion narrative fulfillments: sneering bystanders and wagging heads (v. 7 = Matthew 27:39–40), the crowd's taunt (v. 8 = Matthew 27:43), piercing of hands and feet (v. 16), casting lots for garments (v. 18 = John 19:23–24), extreme thirst (v. 15). The psalm moves from dereliction (v. 1) to vindication (vv. 22–24) to universal eschatological scope (vv. 27–28), providing the full arc of the passion's theological meaning: not ultimate abandonment but heard cry, not defeat but vindication through the resurrection.

Term	Definition
Lament Prayer Tradition	The Old Testament tradition of prayers that cry out to God in suffering, apparent divine absence, and extreme need, psalms that maintain the address to God even when the experience is one of desolation and divine silence (Psalms 13; 22; 38; 42–43; 88). The cry of dereliction is the fulfillment of this tradition in the most extreme possible form: the incarnate Son of God, bearing the sin of the world and experiencing the judicial forsakenness, prays the lament prayer from the cross. The christological grounding of the lament tradition means that Christian believers who cry from the darkness are praying in the pattern of the one who prayed from the cross, and the one who heard His cry will hear theirs.
Eli, Eli / Eloi, Eloi	The Aramaic/Hebrew opening of the cry of dereliction as preserved in Matthew 27:46 (Eli Eli, the Hebrew form) and Mark 15:34 (Eloi Eloi, the Aramaic form). Both are transliterations of the original-language words, preserved alongside the translation provided by the evangelists themselves, a signal of the weight and gravity of the moment. The vocative 'My God, My God' is the direct personal address of the Son to the Father even in the extremity of the forsakenness, claiming the covenantal relationship ('My' = the possessive of belonging) at the very moment when the experience appears to deny it. The preservation of the original words in both accounts signals their irreducible historical and theological specificity.
Spiritual Death as Penalty	The theological concept that the ultimate consequence of sin is not physical death but the withdrawal of the divine presence, the eternal separation from God that is the just consequence of the creature's rejection of God. B.B. Warfield's description: the forsakenness of the cross is the 'spiritual death' that is the consequence of sin, not the cessation of consciousness but the withdrawal of the divine presence and blessing from the one who stands in the sinner's place. The cry of dereliction is the verbal expression of this spiritual death being undergone by the Substitute, who experiences the judicial consequence of the sin He is bearing so that those for whom He bears it need never experience it themselves.
Hebrews 13:5 Promise	The absolute divine promise of the never-forsakenness of the believer: 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you' (NASB 1995, citing Deuteronomy 31:6, 8; Joshua 1:5). The five negatives of the Greek (οὐ μή σε ἀνῶ οὐδ' οὐ μή σε ἐγκαταλίπω, ou mē se anō oud' ou mē se enkatalipō) represent the most emphatic possible Greek denial: 'I will never, no never, desert you; nor will I ever, no never, forsake you.' The theological ground of this absolute promise is the absolute forsakenness of the Substitute at the ninth hour: the forsakenness was exhausted there, for those specific people, and will never fall on them again.

Term	Definition
The Hour of Darkness and Victory	The paradox of the ninth hour: the moment of the greatest apparent defeat (the Son of God crying in forsakenness) is simultaneously the moment of the greatest actual victory (the penalty is being borne, the atonement is being accomplished, the redemption is being purchased). The cry of dereliction is the darkness before the dawn that will express itself three days later in the empty tomb. God's hearing of the cry (Psalm 22:24) is the resurrection: the answer to the cry of dereliction is not a word of explanation from within the darkness but the divine act of vindication in the resurrection that declares the penalty fully paid, the sin fully borne, and the Substitute fully accepted. The darkness of the ninth hour gives way to the light of the first day of the week.
Sabachthani	Aramaic: 'you have forsaken me,' second person singular perfect of the Aramaic verb shbq (שבק, to leave, to forsake, to abandon). Used in the cry of dereliction in both Matthew 27:46 (in the mixed Aramaic/Hebrew lament, transliterated as sabachthani) and Mark 15:34. The verb describes the specific act of leaving behind, of abandonment. In the context of the judicial forsakenness, sabachthani describes the withdrawal of the Father's covenantal-relational presence from the Son who stands in the position of the sin-bearer, the leaving-behind that is the penal consequence of the sin He bears, experienced at the ninth hour as the completion of the three-hour darkness.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the cry of dereliction describes a genuine, objective, judicial reality, not merely a subjective experience of spiritual desolation, and that the forsakenness of the ninth hour is the most concentrated, most explicit, most agonizing expression of the penal substitutionary atonement in all of history. The systematic theology of Lessons 20–22 (necessity, nature, extent) is fully present in this single cry; and the cry is the atonement not as a doctrinal formulation but as a lived, borne, exhausted reality. The congregation that understands the judicial forsakenness will understand the cross at a depth that those who treat the cry as merely metaphorical spiritual desolation will never reach.

We must also believe that the absolute promise of Hebrews 13:5 ('I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you') is not a general divine disposition but a specific, legally grounded, permanently secured commitment grounded in the specific forsakenness of the Substitute. The ground of the promise is the cross; the certainty of the promise is the completed, exhausted, never-to-be-repeated judicial forsakenness of the Son. The believer who knows this will not merely hope that God will not forsake them; they will know it with the same certainty with which they know that the ninth hour is past and the tomb is empty.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the cry of dereliction press you toward the deepest, most searching, most personal gratitude for the cross. The darkness that fell at noon was the darkness that should have been yours, not metaphorically but specifically, judicially, eternally. The forsakenness that Christ cried from the cross was the forsakenness that was the just consequence of your sin, borne by your Substitute so that it would never fall on you. The specific, personal weight of this reality, the nine hours of darkness, the cry, the judicial withdrawal of the divine presence from the sin-bearer, is the weight of what it cost to secure your specific, personal, permanent inclusion in the community of the never-forsaken.

Desire also a congregation that is equipped to pray from the darkness with the christological resources of the lament tradition. Many Christians have been taught, implicitly or explicitly, that expressing the felt absence of God in prayer is a sign of weak faith. The cry of dereliction, and the lament tradition it draws upon, teaches the opposite: the most faithful prayer in the darkest moment is the prayer that maintains the address to God ('My God'), cries honestly about the experience ('why have You forsaken Me?'), and waits for the divine hearing that the Psalm promises (Psalm 22:24). Let the congregation know that the lament prayer is not a failure of faith; it is the pattern of the cross.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Preach Psalm 22 as a passion sermon. The entire psalm, read from the opening dereliction through the physical descriptions of the suffering to the vindication and the universal eschatological scope, provides the most detailed Old Testament account of the passion available. A sermon that reads Psalm 22 through the lens of its fulfillment in Matthew 27, identifying each prophetic detail and its fulfillment in the passion narrative, will give the congregation a transformed understanding of both the Psalm and the cross. The sermon's pastoral aim: the God who heard the cry of dereliction hears every cry of His people.
- Use the cry of dereliction as the christological center of your preaching on suffering and the felt absence of God. The most common pastoral failure in preaching on suffering is to offer general consolation ('God is with you in your suffering') without the specific christological grounding that makes the consolation credible and theologically substantive. The specific consolation that the cry of dereliction provides is: the one who was judicially forsaken in your place is the same one who promises 'I will never forsake you', and the promise is grounded in the completed forsakenness of the cross, not in a general divine disposition to be sympathetic.
- Teach the congregation the lament prayer tradition of the Psalter as a resource for Christian prayer in the darkness. Many evangelical Christians are unfamiliar with the lament psalms as a genre and as a prayer model, because the preaching and worship culture they inhabit emphasizes the positive and the triumphant dimensions of the Christian life while marginalizing the honest expression of suffering, spiritual desolation, and the felt absence of God. A teaching series on the lament psalms, framed by the cry of dereliction as their

christological fulfillment and highest expression, would give the congregation both biblical permission and biblical pattern for praying from the darkness with honesty and faith.

- Preach the cry of dereliction as the ground of the absolute promise of Hebrews 13:5. The five-fold Greek negation ('I will never, no never, desert you; nor will I ever, no never, forsake you') is one of the most emphatic promises in all of Scripture, and it deserves to be preached with the full theological weight of its ground: the completed, exhausted, never-to-be-repeated judicial forsakenness of the Substitute at the ninth hour. The congregation that understands why the promise is absolute will receive it as the most personally transforming declaration of divine faithfulness available, not because God is generally inclined to be present but because the penalty for the forsakenness has been fully paid and will never be exacted again.
- Address the misunderstanding that the cry of dereliction implies the dissolution of the Trinity. In many congregations, the cry creates genuine theological confusion: 'If God the Father forsook God the Son, does that mean the Trinity was broken?' Prepare to address this confusion directly and clearly: the ontological union of the Trinity was not disrupted; the judicial-relational dimension of the Father's covenantal presence was withdrawn from the sin-bearing Son at the moment of the sin-bearing's deepest expression. The distinction between the ontological Trinitarian relations (eternal, immutable) and the covenantal-relational presence of the Father experienced by the incarnate Son (temporarily withdrawn in the act of sin-bearing) is the theological key to understanding the cry without either trivializing it (making it merely subjective) or misusing it (making it imply a broken Trinity).

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OPENING QUESTION

1. When have you personally encountered the felt absence of God in your own experience, the sense that God is distant, silent, or has withdrawn from your situation? How did you pray in that darkness? Did you have christological resources to draw on, did the cry of dereliction and the lament tradition provide a model for how to maintain faith and prayer in the darkness? Looking back, how might a deeper understanding of the cry of dereliction have shaped your experience of and response to the darkness?

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DO THE TEXTS SAY?)

2. Read Matthew 27:33–50 and Mark 15:22–37. Identify the specific details of the darkness and the cry: what time did the darkness begin, how long did it last, and what other cosmic signs accompanied the death of Jesus (see vv. 51–53)? What was the response of the bystanders to the cry of dereliction

(v. 47 in Matthew), and what does their response reveal about their understanding (or misunderstanding) of what Jesus was saying? Read the cry in its original transliterated form in both Matthew and Mark: what is the significance of the evangelists preserving the original-language words alongside their translations?

3. Read Psalm 22:1–31 in its entirety. Identify: (a) the specific details of the psalm that are fulfilled in the passion narrative (at minimum: vv. 7–8, 16, 18); (b) the movement of the psalm from the opening dereliction (v. 1) to the turning point of verse 24 ('He has not despised nor scorned the affliction of the afflicted') to the eschatological scope of verses 27–28. What does the structure of the psalm, from dereliction through vindication to universal eschatological triumph, tell you about the meaning of the cry of dereliction and its anticipated resolution?

4. Read Isaiah 53:8–12 and Galatians 3:10–14 alongside Matthew 27:45–46. How does the 'cutting off from the land of the living' and 'the stroke due to them' of Isaiah 53:8 illuminate the judicial dimension of the forsakenness of the ninth hour? How does the curse-language of Galatians 3:13 ('having become a curse for us') connect to the darkness and the forsakenness of the cross? What is the specific relationship between the bearing of the curse of the law and the experience of the forsakenness of God?

5. Read Hebrews 13:5–6 and Hebrews 4:14–16. In Hebrews 13:5, identify the Greek negation structure of the promise and what makes it among the most emphatic possible divine declarations in Scripture. How does Hebrews 4:15 ('tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin') extend to the experience of the cry of dereliction, in what sense is the sympathy of the High Priest grounded in the extremity of the forsakenness He experienced at the ninth hour? How does Hebrews 4:16's invitation to 'draw near with confidence' follow from the specific experience of the one who was forsaken at the ninth hour?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT MEAN?)

6. The lesson argues that the forsakenness of the cry of dereliction is the 'judicial abandonment of the sin-bearer', the relational-covenantal withdrawal of the Father's presence from the Son who stands in the position of the sin-bearer, rather than either (a) a dissolution of the ontological Trinitarian union or (b) merely a subjective experience of spiritual desolation without objective change. Evaluate both alternatives and the judicial abandonment interpretation against the full range of evidence: the three hours of darkness, the specific cry, the Old Testament background in Psalm 22, and the penal substitutionary context of 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:13. Which interpretation is most exegetically and theologically coherent?

7. The lesson observes that the cry of dereliction is a prayer, a direct address to God ('My God, My God'), even in the extremity of the forsakenness. What is the theological significance of the possessive pronoun 'My' in the context of the forsakenness? How does the Son's maintaining of the address to

God, His refusal to fall silent, His continued prayer even in the darkness, provide a model for Christian lament? What does it mean that the most profound experience of divine abandonment in all of history was expressed as a prayer rather than as a statement of despair?

8. The lesson argues that the absolute promise of Hebrews 13:5 ('I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you') is grounded specifically in the completed forsakenness of the Substitute at the ninth hour, not in a general divine disposition but in the specific, completed, exhausted judicial event of the cross. How does this specific, juridical grounding of the promise differ from a more general grounding in divine benevolence? What does the difference mean pastorally for the person who is experiencing the felt absence of God and who needs the assurance that God has not forsaken them?

9. The lesson presents the cosmic darkness of Matthew 27:45 as not a meteorological event but a divine sign echoing the ninth plague of Egypt and the day-of-the-Lord darkness of the prophets. How does the cosmic dimension of the darkness, creation recoiling as the divine judgment is poured out, deepen the understanding of what is happening theologically at the ninth hour? What does the fact that the Creator's own creation groans under the weight of the divine judgment poured out on the Substitute tell you about the magnitude of the sin being borne and the magnitude of the love that is bearing it?

10. The lesson describes the cry of dereliction as the 'most theologically dense and the most personally searching utterance in all of Scripture.' Having studied the lesson, do you agree? What makes the cry uniquely both systematic (it is the penal substitutionary atonement in its most explicit form) and personal (it is a prayer, addressed to God, from the deepest possible darkness)? What specific pastoral conversations or preaching contexts would most benefit from the specific theology of the cry of dereliction that this lesson has developed?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT DEMAND OF US?)

11. The lesson recommends preaching Psalm 22 as a passion sermon, reading the entire psalm through the lens of its fulfillment in Matthew 27. Design the outline of such a sermon: what is the main point, what are two to three main movements, and what is the pastoral aim? Identify the specific connections between the psalm and the passion narrative that you would highlight, and identify the specific pastoral need in your congregation for which the sermon is most directly relevant.

12. The lesson recommends addressing the potential misunderstanding that the cry of dereliction implies the dissolution of the Trinity. How would you explain the distinction between the ontological Trinitarian union (eternal, immutable, not disrupted) and the covenantal-relational dimension of the Father's presence withdrawn from the sin-bearing Son, to a non-theologically trained member of your congregation who is genuinely puzzled by this? Draft a brief, accessible explanation (three to four sentences) that is theologically precise without being technical.

- 13.** The lesson recommends teaching the congregation the lament prayer tradition of the Psalter. If you were to introduce the lament psalms to your congregation through a four-week Sunday school series or small group study, what would the four sessions cover, and what would the arc of the series be from the opening session to the final one? How would you frame the series so that it is both exegetically honest (the lament tradition involves real cries of genuine darkness) and christologically grounded (the cry of dereliction is the ultimate lament, and the resurrection is the ultimate answer)?
- 14.** This lesson is the penultimate lesson of Unit 7 on the Atoning Work of Christ. Lesson 24 will examine the seven last words from the cross, which include the cry of dereliction as the fourth word. Having studied the theology of the cry in this lesson, what specific dimensions of the fourth word do you most want Lesson 24 to develop further? And looking back over the arc of Unit 7 (necessity, nature, extent, dereliction, and the seven last words), how has the progressive engagement with the theology and the narrative of the atonement deepened your understanding of what the cross accomplished and what it cost?

PRAYER FOCUS

Open this lesson's prayer time with a slow, silent reading of Psalm 22 in its entirety, not read aloud as a performance but read silently by each person in the group as a personal act of inhabiting the psalm. Read it from the opening cry ('My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?') through the darkness of the middle section to the turning point of verse 24 ('He has not despised nor scorned the affliction of the afflicted... but when he cried to Him for help, He heard') and through to the eschatological scope of the ending ('all the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord'). Read it knowing that this is the psalm that Jesus prayed from the cross; that the forsakenness He experienced was real and judicial; and that the hearing He anticipated was accomplished in the resurrection. The psalm that begins in dereliction ends in triumph, because the God who apparently abandoned the Sufferer was simultaneously accomplishing the redemption through the abandonment.

Spend time in silent meditation on the ninth hour: the darkness at noon, the three hours of cosmic silence, the accumulated weight of the sin of the elect pressing upon the one who has taken it upon Himself, the Father's face turned away. Do not rush past the darkness to the consolation. Let the darkness of the ninth hour register with its full theological and personal weight: this is what your sin cost; this is the darkness that was the just consequence of your transgression; this is the abandonment that you deserved. And it was borne, specifically, judicially, completely, finally, by the Son who cried 'My God, My God' in your place.

Then move from the darkness to the consolation: the absolute promise of Hebrews 13:5. The forsakenness was exhausted at the ninth hour; the darkness lifted on the first day of the week; and the promise now stands on the unshakeable foundation of the completed, never-to-be-repeated forsakenness of the Substitute. Pray for the specific members of your congregation who are in their own darkness, who are experiencing the felt absence of God, who are praying from a place that feels like dereliction, who need to know that the God who turned His face away from the sin-bearer at the ninth hour has permanently turned His face toward those for whom He bore it. Pray that the cry of dereliction would become for them not a source of theological confusion but the most personal possible ground of hope.

Close with the promise of Hebrews 13:5–6, spoken together as the corporate reception of the gift that the cry of dereliction purchased, the absolute never-forsakenness of those for whom the Substitute was forsaken:

“He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,’ so that we confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?’”

HEBREWS 13:5–6, NASB 1995

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com