

# My God...Why?

From the series: The Seven Words From the Cross

*Text: Mark 15:34*

Richard A. Rhem  
Christ Community Church  
Spring Lake, Michigan  
Lent IV, March 13, 1994

*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

---

*"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Mark 15:34*

My God why? The fundamental central question of our human existence. And it is the fourth word from the cross. Actually, for Mark and Matthew where it is recorded, it is the only word from the cross. But when we combine the four gospels, as we are doing during the Lenten season, then tradition has ordered them in such fashion that it becomes the fourth word. Luke and John decided not to use this word, although they had the tradition from which it was taken. Were they somewhat frightened by the cry? Was it too strong? Was the darkness too great? Would they soften the sharp reality of that cry which pierced the night noontime? Whatever their reasons, at least from Mark and from Matthew these words are recorded, "My God, My God, why hath thou forsaken me?"

During this Lenten journey we're taking a special angle on the traditional words from the cross. We've noted that it's not as though there was a court reporter down at the base of the cross recording words that came from the lips of Jesus, but rather that the evangelists selected these particular words and placed them on Jesus' lips, in order to give us insight into their own particular understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death.

These words are simply windows. From the respective evangelists these words are the windows through which we can see how they understood what was happening when Jesus died. And so what was Mark telling us by recording this awful cry, "My God, why?" It is the primal scream that arises involuntarily from the human heart in the midst of the cauldron of human suffering from time immemorial. But the cry itself, the phrase, Jesus didn't invent, nor did Mark, for it's a citation from Psalm 22. Psalm 22 is an anguished cry. It begins with those words, "My God, My God, why hath thou forsaken me?" There are some who say that what Mark is doing is reflecting the idea that Jesus was attempting to route this Psalm. If you would read Psalm 22 to its conclusion, you would find that, while it begins in deepest darkness and is a cry of human anguish, nonetheless, if you follow through to the end, the light breaks through. At its conclusion there is vindication and deliverance and praise to God.

There are interpreters who say that that's what Mark is telling us; but I can't really accept that because, if that's what Mark is telling us, then those to whom he wrote would have had to know that he was citing a Psalm, and there is no indication that that would have been true. Most of Mark's listeners would not have been well educated in the scripture readings. And his listeners would have had to know how the Psalm ended, would have to really know the whole Psalm. If you stop to think about it for a moment, if Mark's telling us that Jesus was reciting a Psalm that ended in trust and vindication, then what he would be conveying would be precisely the opposite of what he actually conveys with the actual words he uses: "My God, My God, why?" That is a cry of dereliction, of desolation, a shriek of horror, a wail in the darkness. That's what comes through. That's the picture. No, I don't think it was simply the beginning of a long recitation, I think it was borrowing the Psalm's opening cry of deepest anguish.

There is another very common, classic, traditional theological interpretation of the cry as well. Some of you may remember the old communion liturgy that speaks about Jesus on the cross bearing the wrath of God for us. That on the cross, when he cried, "My God, My God, why hath thou forsaken me?" he was forsaken of God that we might never be forsaken. Well, wherever you might go in scripture in support of that idea, you will have to grant me that it's not in Mark. That is a theological interpretation laid on the passage. It's not in the passage itself. No, No, I think what we have here is one crying out a fundamental central question of our human existence. In the extremity of human suffering, which knows no explanation, the cry is, "My God, My God, why hath thou forsaken me?"

Mark is picturing for us Jesus in the most profound suffering, crying out at the silence of heaven as his whole life in ministry is being contradicted. For it was not simply death against which Jesus was railing but the fact that in his death, everything for which he had lived seemed to be over. His strong proclamation of the nearness of God in grace, of the open accessibility of God to all, excluding none, of the presence of God in his presence at table fellowship, in his touch of compassion for those who were sick, in his incarnation of that gracious Presence of God whom he addressed in the intimacy of "Abba," the address that a child would use for a loving and trusted parent. Such intimacy had characterized his whole life. Even in the garden, even when three times over he prays, if it be thy will let this cup pass from me, even there it's "Abba." But not now, not here. Here it's "Eloi." Here it's God. The intimate communion is broken you see. He is abandoned. Heaven is silent. He is in utter despair.

And he raises the question. Thank God he raises the question. A primal scream from the depths. It is an involuntary exclamation. Thank God Mark tells us that Jesus said, "My God, Why?" because that legitimizes the question you see. That means that there is human experience for which there is nothing to say but "Why?" Not an intellectual question looking for an answer, but the cry of a breaking heart looking for succor: "My God, Why?" That is a valid human experience. The bible tells us so. Jesus tells us so.

That cry has become more poignant to me this Lent than ever before because my friend Arie Brouwer died in October. You know Arie Brouwer. He's been in this congregation. As Executive Secretary of the Reformed Church, he dedicated this sanctuary in 1978. He preached for us a couple of years ago. He was a classmate of mine, a colleague in ministry over many years. Moving from The Reformed Church to The World Council of Churches in Geneva to the National Council of Churches of Christ in this country, he was a born leader, a significant churchman, a believing Christian servant of Christ.

In December of 1992, cancer was discovered. In October of 1993 he died. And a year ago during Lent he preached on the seven words from the cross. He tells a story in one of his sermons about coming from New York and a hospital examination after surgery where his son Steven asked, "Dad, you mentioned living by faith, what does that mean?" And he said, "Well Steve, I've had a love affair with God all my life, and I'm not going to let cancer come between God and me." And Steve said, "You and Mom have given your whole lives to the ministry of the church and to the kingdom of God. This seems like a strange way to repay you." And then Arie heard himself saying to his son, "Steve, I don't think that God wants me to have cancer. But I don't think God can do anything about it." And he said, "I know that that challenges something I've always believed about the almightiness of God, but I've been so busy with survival issues that I haven't been able to think about it. But I am going to think about it, and I can hardly wait until I preach on the fourth word from the cross."

And when he preached that sermon in Glenrock Community Church in New Jersey just a year ago you could tell that he could hardly wait to get to the sermon because it had become his own existential quest, his wrestling in the dark in the midst of cancer, struggling with his question, "My God, My God, why?" He tells how he picked up the book by Rabbi Kushner. If you were here twelve years ago during Passion week, holy week, I treated *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. Rabbi Kushner had lost a child and had gone through deep personal tragedy. Arie found himself coming to the same conclusion that Rabbi Kushner had come to: God is good. God is full of love but God cannot change this situation. The almightiness of God. Because Kushner had said, in classic logic, "If God is almighty, and will not change it, God cannot be good. If God is good and would change it but cannot, then I have to rethink who God is."

In the midst of his cancer struggle this was the process through which my friend Arie was also struggling. He went to the Bible. He found out that almightiness is spoken of God ten times in the New Testament but nine of them appear in the book of Revelation. And the book of Revelation, as you know, is a book about the end time, the end of history. It confirmed Arie's conviction, as he wrestled with his question in a very personal way, that God's love and light will ultimately triumph, but that in the meantime there is no tinkering with the process of history. Whether it be God's self-limitations or however you want to explain it. And as he saw Jesus saying, "Why?" in the darkness, with the heavens sealed, his

own experience was illuminated. And he was convinced that he must change his understanding of God in order to have God, that Loving Presence, with him in the darkness.

I almost hesitated to preach on this word having heard my friend speak out of the anguish of his own dark night. It made me realize how facile is so much pulpit work. So much prattle. It is one thing to talk about the will of God and about the mystery of human suffering when one is healthy and all is well. It is another thing to speak out of the fiery furnace. As I reflected on the experience of my friend, I recognized the value of a Christian formation and the danger of it, and the inadequacy of it. Oh, a Christian formation is valuable. When cancer struck and Arie faced his mortality, he had a tradition to which to turn. He was steeped in it. He had been taught from a child. He had lived in the faith, in the church, in the community of God's people. He had a tradition of faith to which to turn, to test, to plumb. Obviously, we need to tell our children. Obviously we need to nurture our adolescents, giving them a place to stand, a compass for their lives. Obviously we all need a reason for the hope that is within us. We need to be able to speak of the things we believe and the things by which we live and for which we live. There is value in that.

What a precious gift to be deeply steeped in a strong tradition of faith. But there is a danger too. *The danger is that my understanding of the faith will be, in my mind, identical with the God to whom it points.* The danger of a strong traditioning in the faith is that I will see my faith understanding as the absolute truth, rather than a relative grasp of something that is far beyond my grasp. The danger of a strong Christian tradition is that I will come to a moment, as Arie came, when I am face to face with an idea, a conception that no longer works. Then if I have identified my *idea* of God with God, as though the two were absolutely identical, then if my idea crashes, my God crashes. If I have failed to recognize that all of my catechisms and creeds and confessions are stammering, stumbling, human attempts to express what is beyond expression, to apprehend what is incomprehensible, if I don't know that my best wisdom and insight is a partial piece of a larger puzzle, then, when I come into the crunch and it doesn't work, I will be afraid not simply that my formulation needs reworking, but that my God is gone.

Arie went through that experience. He told how, throughout all of his ministry he'd thought about these things, as we all do. And he had tried to rationalize the problem by making a distinction between the *prescriptive* will of God and the *permissive* will of God. Now it's a neat scheme. The prescriptive will of God says these are the things God wills, and the permissive will of God is about the things that God does not will but allows. That can work in some situations. He tells, however, that shortly before preaching that sermon a year ago he saw Billy Graham interviewed by David Frost. Arie knew Billy Graham and respected him. He had crossed paths with him many times. David Frost was pressing Billy Graham. He said to him, "What do you say to a parent whose child has born

severely handicapped, or what do you say about your own Parkinson's disease?" And Arie heard Billy Graham give this distinction between the things that God wills and the things that God allows, adding, "When I see God, I'll have a lot of questions." With great passion Arie reacted, "Billy it just won't do! If you tell me you've got good news from God about all kinds of lesser things but when it comes right down to the center of my existence you have no news, it just won't do. It won't do for me anymore because it won't do anymore for those who love me."

Fortunately, Arie was one who was open and growing and who could look his faith formulations in the face and say, "that won't work anymore. I've got to break through that and move beyond that." Fortunately, he was one who had learned the truth of the poet who penned these words: "Our little systems have their day, they have their day and cease to be. They are but broken lights of thee, and thou, Oh Lord, are more than they." But unless one is open and growing, strong faith formation can be dangerous when you get in the crunch. The finest gift I could give you would be if you hear me, if you could learn from me, if you could receive from me, that you ought to trust God with all your heart, and hold all of your convictions lightly. But an inherited faith, valuable though it is and dangerous though it can become, is finally inadequate. If I have only that which has been given to me, if I have a system of faith, a creedal confessional background, assumptions untested, simply absorbed, they'll not do it for me in the darkness.

Finally, one must own one's own faith convictions, and that will not come apart from concrete human experience. If I have a set of truths that I have to impress upon my experience in order that I may understand my experience, I'm in deep trouble. It is rather out of an honest living of my experience that I come to reflect on the tradition that has been given to me and then make it my own through reformulation and new insight. Secondhand faith will not do it for you in a crisis. Somebody else's convictions and conclusions will not allow you to float in the storm.

Finally, I must believe what I really believe. I like Mark's gospel. I'm grateful that Mark brought Jesus to his last breath with no shout of triumph, no light breaking through, just simply the awful question, "My God, why?" because that's honest. That's the way it is all too often, for all too many. But if that's Jesus last word in Mark's portrayal, it's not God's last word. For following Good Friday dawned Easter Sunday.

I mentioned Arie's funeral in December during Advent. He had become fascinated with Greek Orthodox liturgy and the music of worship of the Eastern Rite. And the funeral service began with a long prelude of entrance music and then the service ensued. The point at which we would come to the committal service, dust to dust, ashes to ashes, there was once again the entrance music. I thought perhaps it was a mistake until I realized that the first entrance music was the entrance into the presence of God in worship, and the second entrance music pointed to the entrance of my brother into light eternal. As the congregation was

acknowledging dust to dust, God was saying, "Good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord." No easy solution this side of the final breath. But there is light beyond, thank God.