

CHRIST'S SOLIDARITY IN OUR ISOLATION

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In the year 2000, and a number of times since then, I have experienced periods of depression. I felt like no-one understood what I was going through. No one had been in the dark hole that I was in. Not only was I alone, but the God I believed in did not seem to offer hope either. He did not prevent me from going into this dark place, and was not acting powerfully to pull me out. I felt like he left me alone there too. What made it worse, was that theologically I believed those intensely *real* feelings, could not possibly be *true*. Yet, God, it seemed, was light years away from me and my feelings.

A MAN WHO SUFFERED.

One person who has been to that isolated place is theologian Jürgen Moltmann. After five months in the Nazi army, Moltmann found himself in the in an anti-aircraft Battery defending Hamburg against the allied Operation Gomorrah. A comrade died in his arms, one of the 40,000 people, many of whom were woman and children who lost their lives in that battle.¹

Again, in winter of 1944, Moltmann found himself holding on to another dying comrade while fighting in southern Netherlands. He writes, "Again I came face-to-face with the insistent question, Why him and not me? What am I going on living for?"² Only months later the allies captured and imprisoned him. To be out of the war left him "partly relieved and partly depressed."³ Soon, however, Moltmann became so depressed that he did not seek treatment for boils that began to cover his body.⁴ While a fellow prisoner intervened that time, the feelings of depression and survivor guilt became all the more intense. As he sat in a Scottish POW camp any vestiges of patriotism dissipated. Depression and feelings of isolation quickly followed as Moltmann continued to wrestle with his guilt for being alive. Photos – pinned to barrack walls – of liberated Nazi Concentration Camps, compounded his guilt.⁵ He could not escape the thought that, as

a German soldier, he unwittingly played a role in supporting this unspeakable evil.⁶

Yet, in the midst of that depressed, Godforsaken isolation, there was a turning point for Moltmann. As he read the Bible which the camp chaplain had given him, the psalms of lament resonated with his wounded spirit.

More than that, as he read Mark's account of the crucifixion, with Jesus' anguished scream "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Moltmann found a God who understood what he experienced.⁷ Because Jesus was God incarnate, Moltmann believes that God experienced the deepest of human suffering, on the cross. It's not physical agony, but the mental anguish of feeling utterly forsaken by his Father-God.

THE SUFFERING GOD

Moltmann has a point here. While Jesus' body was being assaulted, the "my God..." cry of dereliction, shows that Jesus struggled against the mental trauma of these events as well. When we struggle to hold our head above water, or even when we go under with the overwhelming flood of confused emotions and thoughts, we can still run to Jesus. We run into the arms of one who was not always strong, impervious to the assaults of grief and desperation, but one who truly knows our weakness, suffered as we do, and empathizes with us in our pain (Heb 4:15).

Moltmann believes that the depth of Christ's suffering is not fully explained by the fact that he unjustly died under the Jewish accusation of blasphemy.⁸ Nor does the brutality of Roman execution as a rebel account for his anguish.⁹ For Moltmann, it goes deeper than that. Throughout Mark, Jesus had always addressed God as "Father." But now, on the cross, in this moment of deep agony, Jesus, addresses him as "God." For Moltmann, this shift in language poignantly tells of an unfamiliar estrangement when Jesus had only known indescribable closeness with his Father.¹⁰

⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁷ Moltmann, *ABP*, 30.

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans., R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 136.

⁹ Ibid., 144.

¹⁰ Ibid., 146–7.

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place: An Autobiography*, trans., Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 17.

² Ibid., 23.

³ Ibid., 26.

⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁵ Ibid., 29.

This represents not only the Son's agony, but the suffering of God himself. Moltmann understands what happened on the cross, much like the lyrics in the second verse of the song "How Deep the Father's Love for Us"

How great the pain of searing loss,
The Father turns His face away
As wounds which mar the chosen One,
Bring many sons to glory¹¹

In Christ's moment of deep agony, Moltmann believes the Father "gave up" the Son, to whom he had always been faithful.¹² Moreover, for Moltmann, faithfulness is fundamental to who God is. For the Father to "give up" his Son, therefore, is to go against who he is as God. Moltmann goes so far as to say that the cross is a breakdown in the divinity of God.¹³

Because faithfulness is so core to who Moltmann thinks God is, if God the Father, who is one with the Son, can literally "forsake" his Son, then this seems to be the death of God himself. This is indeed Moltmann's point: he thinks Jesus could have cried, "my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken *thyself*."¹⁴ In effect, Moltmann thinks, the divinity of God himself was momentarily destroyed with Jesus on the cross. Hence the title of Moltmann's book on the crucifixion "The *Crucified God*."

Beyond doubt, Christ suffered most profoundly on the cross. Because Matthew and Mark record the cry of dereliction, Moltmann is right to highlight it (Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34). However, I would argue Moltmann's explanation is deeply problematic. Most concerning is this claim that it represents a breakdown in the relationship between the Father and the Son.¹⁵ This would mean that God would have ceased to be who we know him to be. Indeed, if God changed so profoundly back then, what grounds do we have to be assured that he will not change profoundly again?

Additionally, contrary to his intention, Moltmann paints a picture of Christ suffering in a very different way to other humans. While there are limits to our experience of God's closeness, Jesus and the Father's closeness extended to an infinitely greater depth. From eternity past, they had been united. Conversely, we feel God-forsakenness most profoundly when we feel the absence of God even though we believe we *should* experience his presence, there with us.

¹¹ Stuart Townsend, "How Deep the Father's Love" (UK: Thankyou Music, 1995), emphasis mine.

¹² Moltmann, *CG*, 242.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 150-1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, *CG*, 151.

¹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans., Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 80. See also Moltmann, *CG*, 242-3.

We are told this by the Bible. But, if Moltmann is right, Jesus knew – beyond a shadow of doubt – that, the Father was not there for him. Thus, while our experience of God-forsakenness, however real it might feel, is a distortion of reality, for Moltmann's Jesus, this Godforsaken suffering was indeed true and immeasurable.

JESUS TRULY SUFFERED.¹⁶

We need, I suggest, another way of understanding the cross if we are to understand indeed how God identifies with our confused, mixed-up feelings of isolation and abandonment. Even the deep gnawing ones, such as feeling utterly alone in a crowded room. Or the even deeper ones, which faithful Christians feel, when, in the midst of prolonged agony and anguish, there are no words left to pray except, "my God, why aren't you listening to me? Why are you so far from me?"

Remember the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus said to his "friends" "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death... Stay here and keep watch." (Mk 14:34) This is the plea of a man caught in the deepest emotional anguish we can imagine, clutching out for connection with others. Then, watch him stumble in the darkness and fall to his knees, not once, not twice, but three times, to pray. "Abba, Father, ...everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Mk 14:36). Even before his capture, before the beatings, before the beard-plucking and the scourging, the mental torment had begun. Torment, which may have compounded as the longest night and day of his life unfolded. His Father, who was always there with him, did not take "the cup" away as it filled with overwhelming sorrow and grief. Instead, Jesus had to hold on to it. No wonder Jesus screamed near the end, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34) Everything in that day of trauma confirmed he should *feel* alone, absolutely alone.

Some say that though the human Jesus experienced deep anguish, as God, he knew the presence of the Father. They say that Jesus, knowing God was close at hand, used the Jewish custom of reciting the first line of a psalm – in this case Ps 22 – to remind the on looking crowd of the whole Psalm which ends with God's victorious vindication. As such, the cry does not reveal Jesus emotional state on the cross. Conversely, some say that Jesus was simply mistaken. Yet both of these extremes

¹⁶ I would like to thank my colleague Dr. Ruth McConnell, for her advice as I finalised this part of the article.

are problematic.¹⁷ On the one hand it makes Jesus' suffering very different to our own; while we would be overcome by the emotions of the events, Jesus only suffered physically. On the other hand, since Jesus is God, then he is all-knowing and he cannot simply "make a mistake."

I'd like to suggest that a credible alternative position remains.¹⁸ Jesus' divinity did not lessen the full range of human emotions that come with the barbarity of crucifixion – he felt fear, shock, and aloneness, even disappointment with his Father. In this trauma, Jesus suffered the mental angst of *feeling* utterly alone yet *knowing* he remained united to the Father.¹⁹ So Jesus expressed his feelings of alienation in a way that reminded himself – as he grappled with the confusing reality of his predicament – that this was not the last word. Thus, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1) lets the whole lament sit on his memory, including:

"For he has not despised or scorned
the suffering of
the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his
face from him
but has listened to
his cry for help.
(Ps 22:24)

**JESUS' DIVINITY DID NOT LESSEN
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BARBARITY OF CRUCIFIXION**

The cry of dereliction was Jesus' way of expressing his human feelings of isolation while reminding himself of his confidence in God's deliverance. As Jesus himself foretold, (e.g Mt 12:40, Mk 10:34, Jn 2:19–22) God raised Jesus from the dead (Rom 4:20). While Ps 22:1 gives words to the deep anguish which Jesus truly felt, the fact that Jesus is raised by the Father through the Spirit, suggests that Ps 22: 24 might offer a better glimpse into the Father's experience of that event than Moltmann is willing to consider. Because Father, Son, and Spirit are united, the cross shows how the triune God truly knows our deepest pain through the suffering of the Son. What's more, the cross also reveals that God, in love, moved out towards us in our deepest suffering.

CONCLUSION

The painful, gnawing feeling of God-forsakenness which is sometimes associated with mental illness,

¹⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 1, of *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 721, Logos e-Book.

¹⁸ Inspiration for this interpretation of the cry of dereliction comes from a conference talk by psychologist Dr Mark Barker, "How God Heals Hurts," in *Disability Ministry Summit* (Pasadena, CA: Joni and Friends, 2010).

¹⁹ For the link between trauma and feelings of isolation, see Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, Rev. ed. (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 51–2. Jesus' *feeling* of aloneness, is yet another way of recognising how he shares completely in our suffering.

is not soothed by the abstract doctrine that God is present everywhere so is there with us, no matter how we feel. Moltmann argues that we can find solace in the idea that Jesus was actually forsaken by the Father, and therefore God knows our God-forsakenness. Yet, this leads to the problematic belief that the relationship in the Trinity actually broke down. I have argued instead, that as the triune God, he knows the *feeling* of God-forsakenness, because in the incarnate Son, he actually experienced them during the trauma of his crucifixion. These feelings were all the more profound because he knew that they did not correspond to the reality that his Father was actually there for him, as he always is for us.

As important as right understanding is, having a concept of how God actually "knows what we go through" is not primarily about having abstract doctrine right. Rather it's about knowing the compassion of God in our moments of deepest need. It's about knowing the solidarity of the God who

loves me, whether I am in the depths of depression, or having a blue day, because fatigue and stress get the better of me. It's about knowing that when I am

confused and disillusioned, because life just feels like a never ending crawl through treacle-like mud, God knows what this feels like, because even when he was in the centre of the Father's will, Jesus – the incarnate Son – trudged to the cross for you and for me. So when we wake up despairing, or creep slowly through days thick with confusion, anxiety and fear, we can bring our mixed-up emotions and thoughts to God, by the Spirit – who groans with us. He really has been there. God is not simply there with us in our pain; the resurrection of Jesus is our hope. It shows that just as the Father did not forsake the Son in his darkest moments, he will not forsake us in our deepest pits either. Still more, Christ's resurrection looks forward to when God will one day raise us into new life in his new creation - where, no matter how many tears are shed today, "he will wipe every tear from our eyes" (Rev 21:4).

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