

Jesus on the cross: forsaken or spared?

Matthew 27:46

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, Lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Mark 15:34

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?

Forsaken or spared? Is there any argument here? Clearly in these 2 verses, Jesus is crying to His Father, asking Him why He has forsaken Him, right? Wasn't Jesus quoting and fulfilling David's statement in Psalm 22:1? Don't nearly all major translations of the New Testament render this verse in this way? Didn't the Father have to 'look away' and 'forsake' Jesus because He was literally carrying all the sins of the world?

A few years ago I argued a similar treatise in which I stated that Jesus was spared FOR the cross. Spared FROM a premature death, so that He could die as a willing sacrifice for the sins of mankind. In that treatise, I reasoned along these lines:

- Isaiah 53:10 says God made Christ a sacrifice FOR sin. Christ didn't literally 'carry' the sins of the world. He died as a sacrifice, a substitute for our sins. There was a symbolic carrying away of the sin, much in the same way that a scapegoat was used to 'carry away' sins in the Old Testament. The goat didn't become a sinner or literally carry away the sin. Neither did Jesus. The New Testament tells us that our sins aren't washed away until the point we put faith in the sacrifice of Christ and ask Him to save us. Christ's sacrifice didn't literally remove sin at the moment He was offered up. It made a provision, a way that we COULD be washed from all sin and made alive, IF we would forsake our sins and put faith in Christ. Sin can only be carried by those who have made the choice to sin. It's not a physical substance that can be transferred from one person to another.
- John 8:28-29 quotes Jesus as saying that His Father is with Him and hasn't left Him alone because Jesus always does the things that please the Father. These verses are in the context of Jesus being 'lifted up' on the cross, by the will of the Father. If Jesus went to the cross by the will of the Father, what right does the Father have in forsaking Him? Isn't Christ still the Father's "**beloved son, in whom I am well pleased**"?
- 2 Chronicles 15:2 states that the Lord is with us, while we are with Him. It also states that if we forsake God, He will forsake us. The Word of God mentions no other way of forsaking God than by sinning against Him. It is our sin that breaks our relationship with the HOLY God, because God has no fellowship with darkness/sin. Wasn't Christ 'with' the Father by obeying Him and going to the cross? Christ is holy, separate from sinners (Hebrews 7:26). He never sinned. He never forsook His Father. He was an innocent man, sacrificing His life for the sins of mankind. He didn't personally sin. By God's own Word, the Father would have no reason to forsake His obedient Son, Jesus.

- 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 says that God reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ. It says that the Father was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself! Clearly then, Christ dying for the sins of the world was the Father's work! He was the author of it. He was leading Christ to do it. Christ was obeying His Father's will and commandment, which produced the Father's work being done. Can the Father forsake Himself for carrying out His own plans? Then He could no more forsake His obedient Son, who was carrying out the Father's work.

Would you or I forsake an innocent person? How much more God? In Isaiah 1:18 God asks us to 'reason together'. Is God forsaking His innocent Son reasonable? Many well intentioned people, believing the KJV translation of these verses, have set out to find a 'reason' for the Father forsaking Christ on the cross. I'm not aware of any other verse in the Bible that says anything about God forsaking Jesus. Quite the contrary, the New Testament is full of statements that Christ was faithful to the end, so that God has rightly exalted Him and given Him a name above every other name. These actions by the Father show that He was well pleased with Christ's actions, including His willing death on the cross. Men who insist that God forsook His Son are forced to invent a narrative where Christ literally carried our sins, died spiritually, had to go to 'hell' and wrestle with the Devil for 3 days before the Father mercifully raised Him from the dead. None of this is found in the Bible. Yet, many preach this as if it is gospel truth.

We still need to deal with these 2 verses in Matthew and Mark. Didn't Jesus SAY the Father forsook Him? I would agree that the King James translation and many other translations do translate those verses in that way. I was motivated to take up this subject matter again when I saw how the Greek behind this controversial phrase was used elsewhere in the Bible. This study could be considered an addendum to the original argument I summarized above. The remainder of this study will examine the Greek word in these verses that is often translated 'forsaken'. If the translation says Jesus was forsaken, that is one thing. Translations are done by men. Men can be wrong. Men can mistranslate. Does the original Greek SAY that Jesus was forsaken? Is there any other reasonable answer?

Greek Examined

The Greek word that is translated 'forsaken' in these 2 verses can be transliterated (put in an English form, using the English alphabet) as enkataleipo.

- Strong's Greek #1459 - enkataleipo (verb)
- Strong's Concordance - to forsake, leave, abandon
- Thayer's Greek Lexicon - to abandon, desert, to leave in straits, leave helpless, forsake, to leave behind, leave surviving

Looking at the Greek word enkataleipo, both 'en' and 'kata' are prepositions which can modify and/or intensify the root word leipo. Strong's gives a rather short definition. Thayer's gives a more complete one. The expected definitions of 'forsake', 'leave' and 'abandon' are there, along with another possible translation of 'leave behind' or 'leave surviving'. The first definitions are negative in connotation. The last is rather positive. Someone or something was left behind. The determining factor of that action being negative/bad or positive/good has to lie in the motive of the person that did the leaving behind, in our case, the Father.

- Strong's Greek #3007 - leipo (verb)
- Strong's Concordance- to lack, fall short
- Thayer's Greek Lexicon - to leave, leave behind, forsake; (passive) to be left behind, to lag, be inferior, to be destitute of, to lack, to be wanting or absent, to fail

The root word we are examining is leipo. This also carries a meaning of being left behind, for a good or a bad reason. At this point, I'd like to list the other Greek words in the New Testament that have this word leipo as a root.

- Strong's Greek #2641 - kataleipo (verb)
- Strong's Concordance - to leave (behind), neglect; (passive) remain (behind)
- Thayer's Greek Lexicon - to leave behind, to depart from, leave, to be left, to bid one to remain, to forsake, leave to one's self, to abandon, leave in the lurch, to be abandoned, forsaken, to cause to be left over, to reserve, to leave remaining
- ◆ Strong's Greek #2640 - kataleimma (noun)
- ◆ Strong's Concordance – remnant
- ◆ Thayer's Greek Lexicon - a remnant, remains
- Strong's Greek #2645 - kataloipos (noun)
- Strong's Concordance - remaining, left over
- Thayer's Greek Lexicon - left remaining

All of the definitions of these words are similar, because they all contain the same root word, leipo. Strong and Thayer seem to be in general agreement about the definition and meaning of these words. Yet, why should we trust them? What's preventing them from being wrong? Strong and Thayer were both men.

How do we know the true meaning of these words? The best way is to look at how God Himself uses these Greek words in His Bible. We can set aside these two disputed verses for a moment and see how the same word is used elsewhere in the Bible. There are many instances where the word is used in the sense of something being left behind or forsaken in a negative sense. Indeed, this is a primary meaning and usage of the word. There are some uses where the word is used in a 'matter of fact' way where the meaning isn't inherently good or bad. There are some uses where the word is used in a positive sense of someone or something being preserved and spared for a positive reason. As this last meaning is the one I'm arguing for in the disputed verses, I will present verses that show this as a legitimate use of the word. I have also included some verses using this word that show that God doesn't forsake the RIGHTEOUS.

Hebrews 4:1

Let us fear, lest, a promise being left (kataleipo) us of entering into His rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.

Romans 9:27

Esaias (Isaiah) also crieth concerning Israel, Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant (kataleimma) shall be saved:

Romans 9:29

And as Esaias (Isaiah) said before, Except the Lord of Sabaoth (hosts, armies) had left (enkataleipo) us a seed, we had been as Sodoma, and been made like unto Gomorrhha.

The exact same Greek word that describes Jesus as 'forsaken' on the cross is used here for God leaving/sparing/preserving a righteous people, to be SAVED.

Romans 11:4

But what saith the answer of God unto him (Elijah)? I have reserved (kataleipo) to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal.

Acts 15:17

That the residue (kataloipos) of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

Who is this residue/remnant/seed that God has preserved to be saved? It is all those that choose to put faith in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ! By God sparing/preserving His Son until the appointed time to die as a WILLING sacrifice for the sins of all men, God provided the way for all men to likewise be spared and delivered from their sins.

2 Corinthians 4:8-10

We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken (enkataleipo); cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.

Christ told us to pick up our cross and follow Him. We follow His example of how He died on the cross. Galatians 2:20 says we are crucified WITH Christ. The above verse says we are not forsaken (enkataleipo). We are crucified with Christ and we are not forsaken by God. How can it be said that Christ was forsaken but we are not, when our identity is in Jesus Christ? How is this a fair comparison to say that we bear in our body the dying of Christ, yet He was forsaken and we are not? God doesn't forsake us because we are in a relationship with Him through Christ. If God would forsake His righteous Son, how can we have confidence that He won't forsake us, since Christ is our righteousness?

Hebrews 13:5

Let your conversation (conduct) be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake (enkataleipo) thee.

God states again that He will not forsake (enkataleipo) the RIGHTEOUS. Christ was and is righteous.

2 Timothy 4:16-17

At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook (enkataleipo) me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.

Paul was certainly a righteous man. Yet, he said that while MEN had forsook (enkataleipo) him, the LORD did not!

Septuagint Uses

There is a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament that was made approximately 200-300 years before the New Testament was written. It is commonly known as the Septuagint. The Apostles of the New Testament were familiar with this translation and often when the Old Testament is quoted in the New, it is the Septuagint that is being quoted. Looking at how this Greek word leipo was used 200-300 years before the New Testament was written should give some insight into how it was used in the New Testament. Again, I have selected some verses that illustrate the positive meaning of the word I am arguing for. The Greek word in these verses is kataleipein (a verb) which contains the root leipo.

Genesis 7:23

Of fowls also of the air by sevens, the male and the female; to keep (kataleipein) seed alive upon the face of all the earth.

Genesis 14:10

And the vale of Siddim was full of slimepits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, and fell there; and they that remained (kataleipein) fled to the mountain.

Genesis 42:38

And he said, My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he is left (kataleipein) alone...

Exodus 10:5

And they shall cover the face of the earth, that one cannot be able to see the earth: and they shall eat the residue of that which is escaped, which remaineth (kataleipein) unto you from the hail, and shall eat every tree which groweth for you out of the field:

Deuteronomy 3:11

For only Og king of Bashan remained (kataleipein) of the remnant of giants...

Judges 9:5

And he went unto his father's house at Ophrah, and slew his brethren the sons of Jerubbaal, being threescore and ten persons, upon one stone: notwithstanding yet Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left (kataleipein); for he hid himself.

Ruth 2:18

And she took it up, and went into the city: and her mother in law saw what she had gleaned: and she brought forth, and gave to her that she had reserved (kataleipein) after she was sufficed.

1 Kings 19:18

Yet I have left (kataleipein) me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.

2 Kings 25:22

And as for the people that remained in the land of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had left (kataleipein), even over them he made Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, ruler.

2 Chronicles 30:6

...Ye children of Israel, turn again unto the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and He will return to the remnant of you, that are escaped (kataleipein) out of the hand of the kings of Assyria.

Ezra 9:8

And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the Lord our God, to leave (kataleipein) us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in His holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage.

Nehemiah 1:2

That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left (kataleipein) of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.

Isaiah 30:17

One thousand shall flee at the rebuke of one; at the rebuke of five shall ye flee: till ye be left (kataleipein) as a beacon upon the top of a mountain, and as an ensign on a hill.

Jeremiah 52:16

But Nebuzar-adan the captain of the guard left (kataleipein) certain of the poor of the land for vinedressers and for husbandmen.

Zechariah 14:16

And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left (kataleipein) of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles.

Conclusions

Now that we've looked at this Greek word leipo (and its variants) in depth, and have seen that it can be used of someone or something remaining/being spared/being preserved for a good purpose, let's look at the disputed verses once again:

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And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, Lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken (enkataleipo) me?

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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 (enkataleipo) me?

It should be noted that the original Greek New Testament had no punctuation. It had no spaces. It was a string of uppercase letters all pushed together. It was up to the reader to determine by context where punctuation should be. In the same way, it's largely up to the translators to determine where the punctuation should be and what punctuation to use. There was no question mark in the original Greek text for these verses.

There is no doubt that Jesus was crying out to God in these verses. But what was Jesus saying? The phrase '**Eli, Eli, Lama sabachthani**' is Aramaic and what follows is the Greek interpretation. Two possible translations are '**why hast thou forsaken me?**' and '**for this I was spared!**'. In fact, the latter reading is how these verses were translated by George M. Lamsa in his translation of the Aramaic New Testament. As there was no punctuation in the original Greek text, an exclamation point is certainly just as appropriate as a question mark might be, especially given this context of Jesus MAKING it to the cross, to die as a willing sacrifice.

What was Christ spared FROM?

Christ came to die for our sins. For it to be a real sacrifice, it had to be offered by Christ's own will. If He had been forced by the Father or if He had been murdered by the Jews before the cross, it wouldn't have been a sacrifice God could accept. It wouldn't be a sacrifice at all, as it would have been outside of Christ's will. It had to be an offering. It had to be an innocent life, freely offered up by Him. Christ confirms the nature of His sacrifice:

John 6:51

I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

Examples of this 'sparing':

Luke 4:28-30

And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up, and thrust Him out of the city, and led Him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. But He passing through the midst of them went His way.

John 7:30

Then they sought to take Him: but no man laid hands on Him, because His hour was not yet come.

John 8:20

These words spake Jesus in the treasury, as He taught in the temple: and no man laid hands on Him; for His hour was not yet come.

John 8:59

Then took they up stones to cast at Him: but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.

These are examples of what Christ was spared FROM: a premature death. A death that wasn't freely offered up.

John 10:17-18

Therefore doth my Father love (not forsake) me, because I lay down my life (on the cross), that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again, This commandment have I received of my Father.

In the light of the rest of the Word of God, in the light of reason/logic and in the light of God's character of love, God could not have forsaken His Son at any time. Jesus understood His Father and wouldn't be asking His Father why He forsook Him. Jesus' statement/cry of "**for this I was spared!**" agrees well with other statements He made from the cross, such as: "**Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do**" and "**Father, into your hands I commend my spirit**". How could Christ have any confidence of commending His spirit to God if He knew God had forsaken Him? Would Christ have the confidence to pray for His murderers knowing that the Father had forsaken Him? If someone is forsaken of God, he doesn't have an audience with God to have His prayers heard or answered. Christ's positive prayers toward the Father show that He didn't believe God had forsaken Him.

Isaiah 49:14-15

But Zion said, the Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me. Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.

Sincerely,
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December 1st, 2010

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