

What If God Was Never Gone?

By Mike Haddorff

When Jesus cries from the Cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” the moment lands with crushing weight. For many of us, this has been taught as the instant God finally turns His face away, the Father abandons the Son so punishment can be completed. Penal Substitution depends on this reading. God must withdraw. Separation must occur. Wrath must fall.

But what if God was never gone?

Scripture consistently resists the idea of divine abandonment. God promises, again and again, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” Not conditionally. Not temporarily. Never. If this is true, then Jesus’ cry cannot mean that God actually abandoned him. So how are we to understand it?

It’s helpful to look at Psalm 22.

Jesus quotes from the opening verse in this Psalm. He is not inventing a new statement in agony. He is praying a familiar prayer, one that begins in anguish. But if we continue reading, just a few verses after the cry of forsakenness, the psalm declares:

“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.” (Psalm 22:24) And This line matters.

The psalm explicitly denies that God turned away. God did not hide his face. God did not abandon the sufferer. And yet the experience of abandonment is still voiced honestly and without restraint. This tension is the key.

There is a difference between actual abandonment and experienced abandonment.

Within the Christian tradition, one understanding of the Cross, is that Jesus does not stand apart from humanity, absorbing punishment meant for others. He stands within humanity, entering fully into our shared experience, including the experience of feeling God-forsaken. Not because God has withdrawn, but because this sense of absence is tragically common in the human condition.

Jesus goes there. He enters the silence. He carries the confusion. He remains faithful when perception collapses. This is not useless information. This is solidarity.

The Cross does not reveal a divided God, loving on one side, wrathful on the other. It reveals a united God who refuses to abandon humanity, even when humanity feels utterly alone. Jesus does not expose God’s absence; he exposes God’s nearness in the very place we assume God cannot be.

If God was never gone, then Jesus’ cry becomes even more powerful. It tells us there is no depth of despair, doubt, or felt abandonment where God has not already been present. Even there. Especially there.