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My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?

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Of the "seven last words," these are the most haunting and riveting, the most disturbing and unfathomable. They are so because they are unexpected. What reader would expect the self-possessed, wisdom teacher figure of the Matthean story to express himself with such emotion? They are so because of the dramatic scene—a crucifixion, the most public and humiliating of ancient world punishments—in which they occur. They are so because they constitute a question (the only one among the "seven last words"—an awful, pathetic, wrenching question to which no answer is given, to which no answer is possible). They are so because of the question actually posed: following the evangelist Mark in taking the question directly from Psalm 22:1, the evangelist Matthew makes the question on the lips of Jesus a disturbing and unfathomable one for listeners and readers of every age.

The question cuts to the core of the puzzle about the meaning of human existence from a particular site of interpretation reflecting a particular set of experiences: What has *God* to do with this? *Where* is God in all of this? It is the challenge of a human-sensitive figure challenging all others—including God—to take account of unexplained, unjustified, unexpected perduring pain, suffering, forsakenness that defines human experience. Both the Psalm 22 reference and the larger narrative context in which the question is raised make it clear that God has everything and nothing to do with human suffering. God is responsible for all things (witness the darkness occurring at midday) and God is nowhere to be found. Yet Jesus, as the story goes, experiences victory. So Jesus' question jolts all readers into seeing that the attempt to fathom and address the puzzle of human hurt and forsakenness is the only means to human hopefulness and victory.

