

Was Jesus Separated from the Father while on the Cross?

Although no New Testament passage addresses the answer to this question directly, the conclusion that Jesus as separated from the Father while on the cross is drawn from three passages:

1. Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34 in which Jesus quotes Psalm 22:1, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”
2. Habakkuk 1:13, “Thou canst not look on wickedness.”
3. Isaiah 59:2, “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and God.”

In each case, conclusions have been drawn without considering the context.

Edersheim recorded that Psalm 22 was considered to be messianic by many in Jesus’ time. This is confirmed by the fact that the scribes and elders, Matthew 27:43, quoted Psalm 22:7 to taunt Jesus, whom they had rejected as the Messiah, “He trusts in God; let Him deliver Him now, if He takes pleasure in Him.” Apparently, Matthew also believed that Psalm 22 was about the Messiah.

In John 19:24 (also recorded in Matthew 27:35), the apostle believed that the division of Jesus’ clothing was a fulfillment of Psalm 22:18, “That the Scripture might be fulfilled, ‘They divided My outer garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.’”

In Hebrews 2:12, the inspired writer quoted Psalm 22:22, “I will proclaim Thy name to My brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will sing Thy praise.” This Messianic Psalm was applied to Jesus’ life and death (Hebrews 2:9, “Because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor”). The author’s point is that Jesus was proclaiming God to His brethren even from the cross, that Jesus was demonstrating His own trust in God by subjecting Himself to that form of suffering and death.

Clearly, the New Testament writers considered Psalm 22 to be Messianic. And, since Jesus was not likely to quote any Scripture out of context, the conclusion must be drawn concerning Psalm 22:1, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me,” that Jesus was applying this Psalm to Himself. Psalm 22:24 must be included in the idea Jesus was trying to get across, “For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither has He hidden His face from Him; but when He cried to Him for help, He heard.” The Scriptures explicitly state that God did not “hide His face” from Jesus while Jesus was on the cross.

Habakkuk 1:13, “Thou canst not look on wickedness,” has been used to support the doctrine that, when Jesus took upon Himself the sins of the world, God could no longer look at Him. Most importantly, Habakkuk was not making the point that God cannot look upon sin. Habakkuk’s complaint was that God appears to be favoring those who were more wicked than the Israelites; God appeared to be holding really nasty people in high regard. The passage has nothing to do with a principle that God cannot look upon sin. If that were true, then the only way we could have been forgiven is if Jesus forgave us while the Father looked the other way, which leaves the Father and the Son acting in contradiction to one another. God sees sin every day. The majority of the people of the world are lost in sin. God is grieved by what He sees. Concentrating the

sins of the faithful (not the unfaithful) on Jesus does not make them more or less horrible. One sin is enough for condemnation.

Isaiah 59:2, “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God,” has been used to support the doctrine that sin separates people from God, therefore Jesus was separated from God when He took on the sins of the world. Again, the passage is taken out of its context and applied to a point that the author was not making. Isaiah was condemning godless Israelites, not faithful people. Isaiah does not say that God separated Himself from sinners, but that sinners separated themselves from God. Jesus did not live in sin; He never turned away from God. We are saved by His faith. Paul quoted Leviticus 18:5 in Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:12, “The man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness.” Jesus lived by faith, as do Christians. Sin does not separate Christians from God; neither did it separate Jesus.

The phrase from 2 Corinthians 5:21, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf,” if taken literally, teaches that a human being became a concept. The phrase has an important figurative meaning; it cannot be taken literally unless we decide that the Messiah did not come in the flesh, but rather came as a concept, which was a popular Gnostic view against which the apostle John wrote (e.g., 1 John 4:2 – 3, 2 John 7). The application of this figure of speech is found in Leviticus 16:22, “And the goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities.” Jesus is named as the permanent scapegoat of Yom Kippur, just as He is also our sin offering (Ephesians 5:2) and our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7). God did not look away from the scapegoat under the Law, even though all the sins of Israel were laid on its head. In fact, God called sacrifices a “sweet smelling savor” forty times in the Bible, including the sacrifice of Jesus (Ephesians 5:2).

The Father and the Son are One (John 10:30). They cannot be separated. Jesus had a body and a mind and a Spirit. Jesus’ Spirit is God. God could not turn away from Himself. The concept of the Father turning away from Jesus (as separate from the Son of God) arose from the Docetists who taught that Jesus became the Son of God at His baptism (when the Spirit came and rested on Him), and ceased to be the Son of God on the cross. They used Jesus’ quotation of Psalm 22:1 as proof that the man Jesus suddenly realized that the Spirit of God had left Him to die alone and abandoned, that He was then bearing the sins of the world with only His mind and body, but lacking a Spirit. The Docetists could not reconcile Jesus’ divinity with Jesus’ mortality, so they had to have God leave Him. Essentially, they said that the man Jesus was a carrier for the Son of Man, but they were not the same person. They claimed that Jesus was the sacrifice, not the Son of God. Of course, this makes Jesus no more important than a sacrificial animal, since He had no Spirit when He died.

Finally, if Jesus were separated from God by the sin He bore for use, why was Jesus’ condemnation so short? What sacrifice was offered to release Jesus from His sin? The answer is that Jesus took our sins on Himself in the same way as Old Testament sacrifices took on sins. God did not turn away from a sacrifice for sin; He called those sacrifices and Jesus’ sacrifice a “sweet smelling savor”.