

The Seven Sayings from the Cross

by Desmond Ford

[In Part 1, Jesus' first three sayings from the cross were examined. In this concluding selection from Dr. Desmond Ford's *A Kaleidoscope of Diamonds: The Jeweled Glories of the Cross Revealed, Volume Two*, the last four sayings are discussed.—Ed.]

THE SEVEN SAYINGS from the cross (RSV):

- "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34).
- "Truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43).
- "Woman, behold your son! . . . Behold your mother!" (Jn 19:26,27).
- "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46).
- "I thirst" (Jn 19:28).
- "It is finished" (Jn 19:30).
- "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" (Lk 23:46).

4. THE WORD OF ANGUISH TO GOD
"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46).

To understand this mysterious cry of dereliction, we must include the strange bewilderment of Christ in Gethsemane. It is all related to these words from the cross. Where Mark uses the words "greatly distressed and troubled" (Mk 14:33), the Greek term translated "troubled" (*adēmonein*) describes a confused, distracted state which sometimes results from physical derangement. According to Swete it means "the distress which follows a

great shock." Christ was no coward, but here he is in agony as he faces death.

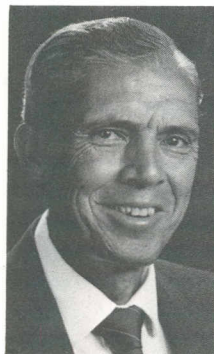
The One Great Fact

One fact and one fact only can explain the two events: the shocked, distressed spirit and bleeding brow in the garden, and the anguished cry from Golgotha. That fact is that Jesus was "made sin for us," even "a curse" (2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13). God hid his face from Christ who represented the sin of all the ages. When Christ foretold his fate, he likened it to the time when Moses lifted up the molten serpent on a banner staff (Jn 3:14). He was telling Nicodemus that he was to be treated as the devil, as sin incarnate.

Is not the worst part of sin's punishment the awareness of being separated from God? Could Christ truly have taken our place without experiencing such separation from his Father? Peter Green suggests that would "have been as if He had paid the farthings, pence, and shillings of some vast debt but left the pounds for us to pay."¹

Spurgeon says that the records of

Only those who live through the dark see the glories of the dawn.



DESMOND FORD

time and eternity do not contain a sentence more full of anguish than this fourth word from the cross. Christ had endured silently all the torment of his body, but when his Father forsook him, his great heart broke. It is not, "Why has Peter forsaken me? Why has Judas betrayed me?" These were terrible griefs, but this is the sharpest and cut him to the quick. "The sufferings of his soul were the soul of his sufferings."

Calvary Banishes the Horror of Being Forsaken

There are times when some of us face a horror which makes the brain reel and the heart faint, "the horror of a universe without God, a universe which is one hideous, tumbling, crashing mass of confusion with no reason to guide and no love to sustain it." At such times a glance at Calvary can steady us and perhaps even restore us. He was forsaken that we might never be. He prayed that prayer, that we might never need to. We need not suffer for our sin, for Christ has suffered in our place. Therefore, however overwhelming our grief and bewilderment, let us like Christ hold on, crying, "My God, my God . . ." Hold on to the arm which only appears to be thrusting us away.

*It is good to remember
that those who know
how to pray continuously
in life find it much easier
to do so in death.*

Recall the Syrian Phoenician woman to whom Christ momentarily pretended to be unsympathetic (Mk 7:24-30). Let her faith be yours also. Hold on. Nightmares never last. Tunnels have their exits. Only those who live through the dark see the glories of the dawn.

Hating Sin

Should we not hate the sin that brought such agony to him who loved us so? Shall we sin lightly because there is forgiveness with

God? That would be like cutting ourselves with a knife because we have a Band-Aid. How can one who is loved so much stab the heart of the One loving? The cross is a revelation of how much our sin hurts God, and only the insensible are not anesthetized against rebellion by the sight.

The dearest idol I have known
Whate'er that idol be,
Lord, I will tear it from its throne,
And worship only Thee.

Observe that this central word of the cross epitomizes the heart of the Atonement—Christ in our stead being treated as sin itself! Our Redeemer in his divine nature suffers infinitely for us.

5. THE WORD OF SUFFERING TO THE SPECTATORS

"I thirst" (Jn 19:28).

As Samson thirsted after his tremendous battle wherein he slew hundreds (Judges 15:18), so now our Lord thirsts after his struggle has deteriorated his physical condition. Christianity is not asceticism. The body is one of God's gifts and is to be treated with respect. For the body's good we are to use, but not abuse, the things of this world. On the cross, Jesus refused the opiate drink offered him, but later accepted the sour ration wine.

This is the only word of physical pain uttered by Christ on the cross. How it rebukes us for our extreme sensitivity to bodily discomfort! If the innocent One suffered, is it strange that we sinners should often be physically chastised? We can draw comfort in our sufferings from remembering that Jesus sympathizes with us, for he too entered into our frailties and woes. He knows our desires, and in his good time he will grant us what is right. All physical joys are his invention, not the devil's.

The words, "I thirst," signify his spiritual thirst also. Like many of the expressions voiced during this day of all days, it has a double meaning. He thirsts for the love of his redeemed and for fellowship with them. Behold the infinite condescension of our Christ. He made the mighty oceans, streams,

and fountains, yet for us he consents to be thirsty.

The record says that "immediately one of them ran" to alleviate his thirst. How slow we have been, and how deaf!

*Neither life nor death
has terrors for the one
trusting in the God who
is love.*

6. THE WORD OF VICTORY TO HIS PEOPLE: FINISHED!

"It is finished!" (Jn 19:30).

Like the preceding cry, this is but one word in the original (*tetelesthai*), but that one word contains an ocean of significance. "It consolidated heaven, shook hell, comforted earth, delighted the Father, glorified the Son, brought down the Spirit, and confirmed the everlasting covenant."

It is the worker's cry of achievement and the sufferer's cry of relief. Note how it matches his first words in the temple: "Don't you know that I must be about my Father's business?" Throughout his ministry he was ever aware of the baptism with which he must be baptized—a baptism of blood. Now it is successfully finished.

It is a word from the first creation when God finished his work on the sixth day before entering into rest. So it echoes forth now on the sixth day before the Son rests from his labors of re-creation. The term befits a great work, a difficult work, and a perfect work. Twice more he will utter the words, once when his work of intercession in heaven ceases, and once when the new heaven and the new earth stand forth complete (Rev 16:17; 21:6).

Believer, rejoice! Your redemption is finished. All that was necessary to break down the barriers between you and God has been done.

7. THE WORD OF CONTENTMENT TO HIS FATHER

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46).

This was the child's goodnight prayer Jesus had been taught by

Mary. Again we see Christ's respect for Scripture, for he is quoting Psalm 31:5. Here is Christ's view of death. He implies that he is giving his life away in the certain hope of finding it again. No wonder Polycarp, Huss, Jerome of Prague, Luther, Melancthon, and many others made these their last words also. It is good to remember that those who know how to pray continuously in life find it much easier to do so in death.

The record says that he cried with a *loud voice*. This is uncommon for a dying person in such a weakened state. Similarly, we read that "he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost" [expired]. "Who is He who thus easily falls asleep when He wills?" asked Bernard of Clairvaux. Here we have no helpless broken victim whose life ebbs away. What we have is the infinitely strong One choosing to die, purposefully depositing his life in heaven's charge. The word for "commit" was used for the placing of something valuable in the charge of a friend. The word translated "bowed" is one used for resting one's head on a pillow for sleep. The cross becomes God's pillow.

The Science of Living and Dying

We have here the science of living and dying. All is to be done by faith in the infinite God. Neither life nor death has terrors for the one trusting in the God who is love. There can be *no final failure* for the Christian. Neither does he ever say goodbye for the last time to any who also believe.

As Christ bows his head, he seems removed from the title above it. At death we must all leave our titles and our "goods." Is it not, therefore, best to deposit much of them with God beforehand?

This last word from Christ invites us to follow his example. Whenever anything distresses or alarms us, it is our privilege to commit it to God in prayer, practicing the continual realization of his presence and sufficiency, and resting in him. Why should we not be confident? Has not Christ defeated all our foes? Does he not now live to

intercede for us? If Christ be for us, who can be against us?

Summary of the Seven

In simple, grateful terms we could say that all the sayings of Christ on the cross, as in his whole ministry, amount to one simple thing—*God loved sinners enough to die for them*. Are you a sinner? He died for you.

A Memory Device

Dr. J.J. Given has suggested a mnemonic for the seven words as follows: **prayer, promise, provision, position, pain, perfection, presentation**. Think of them as peas in a pod of our Lord's last will and testament.

THE OFFICES OF CHRIST

Now let us look at Christ's offices as reflected in his sermon headings:

1. Priest—"Father forgive them."
2. King—"Verily I say . . . thou shalt be with me in Paradise."
3. Human—"Woman, behold thy son."
4. Substitute—"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"
5. Sufferer—"I thirst."
6. Worker—"It is finished."
7. Faith's Exemplar—"Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit."

At death we must all leave our titles and our "goods." Is it not, therefore, best to deposit much of them with God beforehand?

A GOSPEL CREED

We also find our creed in this sermon from the cross. It does not have twenty-six or thirty-nine articles, but only seven.

1. The forgiveness of sins.
2. The eternal reward for all who hang their helpless souls on Christ, trusting only in his personal merits.
3. The church (symbolized by Mary) appointed to care for believing children and to be

cared for by them.

4. The death of their Representative and Substitute alone guarantees that believers will never be forsaken. That death honors God's law more than the obedience of the whole human race could ever have done. The Son of God fulfills the precepts and the penalty of the eternal code.
5. The Scriptures are trustworthy and must be fulfilled.
6. The atonement is complete, and the justification of the race has been secured.
7. The dying do but sleep in God, and their resurrection is certain.

CHRISTIAN DUTIES

More important than creed is behavior, though the latter usually issues from the former. The sayings of Christ teach us that our primary Christian duties are those of:

1. Forgiveness.
2. Faith and penitence.
3. The hallowing of family and church relationships.
4. Holding on to God though apparently rejected.
5. Trust in Scripture.
6. Perfect obedience.
7. Resignation and contentment.

In essence, the duties of a Christian as expressed in the sayings of Christ from the cross amount to the simple precept, "Trust and obey."

The brilliant light streaming from the altar of Calvary is summed up in Christ's sayings, and that light is sufficient to guide the steps of any sinner, however weak and guilty, to the kingdom of God. □

NOTES

1. Peter Green, *Studies in the Cross*, (London, 1917), p.101. The names for the seven last words are from Arthur Pink.

[This two-part series on the seven sayings from the cross was adapted from Desmond Ford's *A Kaleidoscope of Diamonds: The Jeweled Glories of the Cross Revealed*, Volume Two, pp.79-95. Available for \$8.95 (plus \$1.50 postage/handling) from Desmond Ford Publications, 7955 Bullard Drive, Newcastle, CA 95658.]