

# THE SEVEN SAYINGS FROM THE CROSS

PART  
BY DESMOND FORD

**T**HE SEVEN SAYINGS from the cross constitute the Redeemer's final sermon, a blazing altar light illuminating the darkness of our lives. What a unique pulpit, preacher and message! We put our God to sleep on a cross, tucking in his hands and feet with nails and giving him a pillow of thorns. Yet in his love and mercy he speaks to us, not words of fiery rebuke and indignation, but words of light and grace.

Any deathbed is a solemn sight, but especially if it is the death-bed of someone we love. This is even more the case if we ourselves have been responsible for that suffering and death.

The seven sayings are a little Bible. They tell us how to live and how to die. They also express the seven chief duties of the believer, and the seven main articles in a Christian's creed. They unveil Christ's glory—his offices, his perfections, and his truth. The seven make up a circle ending where it began, with the call of a trusting child to his father. In principle, the seven sayings give us a cross section of all of life's situations, and help us to relate to them aright.

The seven sayings were addressed to an audience in heaven and on earth. They were addressed in particular to friends and foes gathered about the cross.

## The Structure of the Sayings

As usual, with the sevens of Scripture, these are divided into sets of three and four, with the first set

entirely dedicated to the needs of others. Following these came the mysterious darkness during which Christ spoke not at all until the three hours had passed. Then his fourth saying dissipated the blackness and ushered back the sunshine. In quick succession came the last three exclamations of the dying Sufferer.

Here are the seven sayings in their order (from the RSV):

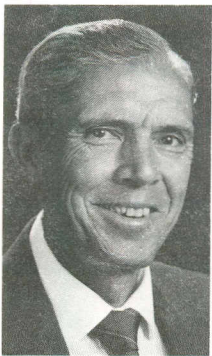
- "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:24).
- "Truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43).
- "Woman, behold your son! . . . Behold your mother!" (Jn 19:26,27).
- "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46).
- "I thirst" (Jn 19:28).
- "It is finished" (Jn 19:30).
- "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" (Lk 23:46).

Let us now consider the seven sayings one by one, remembering as we do so, the words of Krummacker when he asserted that Christ's enemies by the crucifixion broke "a diamond in pieces," thus only causing it to show its genuineness by its sparkling splinters. "In their wrath, they plucked to pieces a divine rose, but by so doing, only displayed the brilliance and enamel of every petal."<sup>1</sup>

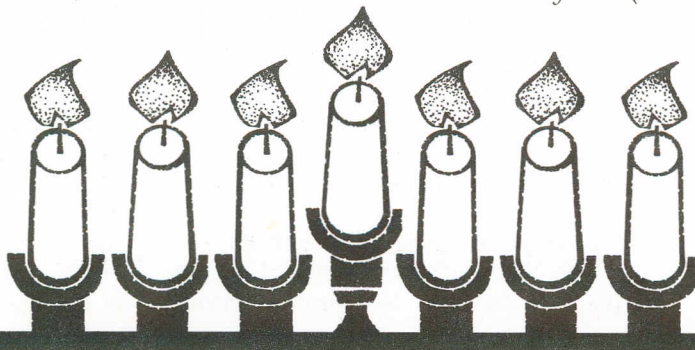
## 1. THE WORD OF INTERCESSION FOR HIS CRUCIFIERS

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:24).

**Forgiveness is the door into the "Temple Beautiful" of the Christian life. As glasses are of no value if we are blind, or shoes if we are paralyzed, so only when sin's guilt is removed is the power of sin also broken**



DESMOND FORD





The very first word, "Father," is full of significance. While these messages from the cross address Jesus' crucifiers and immediate companions (the thief, his mother, and beloved disciple), they are bracketed at each end by his calling upon God as his Father. Only because he knew God was his Father could Christ endure the crucifixion.

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*If there was hope for the crucifiers of our Lord, is there not hope for the worst persons we encounter?*

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There is a lesson in this. We can accept the vilest medicine from the hand we trust. True sanity can best be preserved in a world of insanity by confidence that life has meaning, and that its meaning is good. Hope provides a "why" which enables us to put up with any "what."

**Our Primary Need Is Forgiveness**

Often in the Gospels Christ himself forgave those who sought him. But on the cross, inasmuch as he is being treated as sin itself, he asks his Father in heaven to grant forgiveness.

In this petition we find the clue to our primary need. Noble ideals and lofty resolutions are powerless unless the sin question is settled. Forgiveness is the door into the "Temple Beautiful" of the Christian life. As glasses are of no value if we are blind, or shoes if we are paralyzed, so only when sin's guilt is removed is the power of sin also broken (Rom 6:14). *Sin ceases to have dominion over us when our hearts are broken by the forgiving grace of God.* Heaven's mercy is a healing mercy, and justification (being declared righteous) is always accompanied by the beginning of sanctification (righteous living).

**Every Relationship Needs Forgiveness**

Every relationship of life calls for the spirit of forgiveness. There are no perfect spouses or children, employers or employees, or neighbors. As we behold that

Christ did not harbor even the smallest root of bitterness or resentment or condemnation, we are ourselves challenged to avoid harsh judgment of others.

Marvel also at the charitable hope of Christ. He does not quickly despair of men. Neither should we. If there was hope for the crucifiers of our Lord, is there not hope for the worst persons we encounter?

What we live by, we should and must impart, and even the most righteous Christian lives by forgiveness, for it is written "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin" (Ps 32:1,2; Rom 4:8). Because the believer has legally died with Christ, all the believer's sins are atoned for, be they past, present, or future. The Lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world—all the sin of all people in all times. We are "complete in him" (Col 2:10), "accepted in the Beloved" (Eph 1:6) and "there is therefore now no condemnation" (Rom 8:1). What blessing is like the blessing of forgiveness? Consequently, pass it on.

**2. THE WORD OF SALVATION TO THE PENITENT THIEF**

*"Truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise"* (Lk 23:43).

[The original manuscripts of the Bible had no punctuation, and we have placed the comma of the sentence where we believe it belongs.]

The conjunction of this saying with Christ's word of forgiveness is striking and significant. God's forgiveness is not indiscriminate. It is for the penitent. The same sunshine that brings forth fruit from the black earth shines in vain upon black rock. The other thief curses on and is lost.

It is quite possible to be lost though in close proximity to Christ, if we do not permit his love to melt our hate and selfishness. Christ, who seemed so easy on the souls who knew their need, was also hard on the self-righteous. Salvation is *easy* for those who acknowledge their guilt, but *impossible* for those who think they need no repentance.

**Salvation by Grace Through Faith**

The thief is saved without works (though he uses in Christ's service

the only member of his body free to work, his tongue), but he is not saved without faith. His was the greatest faith in Israel that day. He saw in the condemned, dying, forsaken Jesus, the King of Paradise. What a wonderful thief is this, stealing heaven itself by happy permission of the Owner of Paradise. Observe also that from his high court this thief reverses the judgment of Annas and Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod, the Sanhedrin and the mob. He calls Christ Lord, Master of heaven and earth.

The thief is a perfect illustration of salvation by grace alone. For a long time the thief had been exposed to law, but law did not reform him. Now, when he sees the true law as a love incarnate, his heart is broken, his rebellion melted.

To run and work the law commands  
But gives us neither feet nor hands;  
But better news the gospel brings,  
It bids us fly and gives us wings!

**3. THE WORD OF AFFECTION TO HIS MOTHER**

*"Woman, behold your son! . . . Behold your mother!"* (Jn 19:26,27).

Observe that even the suffering of God himself is subject to the eternal principles he gave from Sinai to his ancient redeemed people. Now he honors the fifth commandment by respect for his mother. He provides for her the best possible endowment, the love of his dearest friend.

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**Mary as Symbol of the Church**

Many commentators have seen in Mary a symbol of the church, which is "the mother of us all." Consequently, they have found depths in Christ's twofold statement in John 19:26,27 that are not immediately apparent. John and Mary were not related by birth, but now as people reborn they become members of the same family.

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Thus it is with the church as a whole. Those reborn in Christ are related to all others similarly regenerated. They belong to the one family. From this saying we learn that believers are to exercise love and respect towards the church which is their mother, and the church is to collectively demonstrate love and care for each of her sons and daughters.

The saying is a particular admonition to the leaders of the church (pastors, teachers, and administrators). Church leaders are to have a special care for the weak and needy of the fold, and for the straying.

### **The Family Is a Sacred Unit**

However, the obvious intent of the saying must not be lessened by other legitimate deductions. Christ sees the family as a sacred unit. With the Sabbath, it is one of the heirlooms of Eden, that ancient Paradise. Were homes hallowed by

true religion today, we would dwell in a little paradise *en route* to the great Paradise.

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All family relationships are sacrosanct—husband and wife, father and mother, son and daughter. They mirror relationships in God's great family of heaven and earth.

The Calvary narrative repeatedly draws upon the initial scenes of Scripture. Both in the first chapters of Genesis and in the story of the cross we have references to a garden, a tree of life and a tree of knowledge of good and evil, a naked Adam who falls asleep (and

has his side opened that he might have a bride), family relationships, the finishing of work and entering into rest, the Sabbath, temptation and the curse, two thieves, the issue of the right to Paradise. Each account casts light upon the other.

[Next time, in Part 2, the seven sayings will be completed with the remaining four. Also, the offices of Christ and a Christian creed will be drawn from the seven. Don't miss!—Ed.]

### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>F.W. Krummacher, *The Suffering Saviour*, Baker Book House reprint, 1977, pp. 361-363.

*The names for the seven last words are from Arthur Pink.*

*This article taken from: "A Kaleidoscope of Diamonds: The Jeweled Glories of the Cross Revealed." Available for \$8.95 (plus \$1.50 postage & handling) from Desmond Ford Publications, 7955 Bullard Dr., Newcastle, CA 95658.*

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