

THE GLORY OF THE CROSS

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CHAPTER SIX

"MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?"

"The Psalm of the Cross begins with 'My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?' and ends, according to some, in the original with 'he hath done this' or 'it is finished.' For plaintive expressions uprising from unutterable depths of woe we may say of this psalm, 'there is none like it.' It is the photograph of our Lord's saddest hours, the record of His dying words, the lachrymatory of His last tears, the memorial of His expiring joys. David and his afflictions may be here in a very modified sense, but as the star is concealed by the light of the sun, he who sees JESUS will probably neither see nor care to see David. Before us we have a description both of the darkness and of the glory of the cross, the sufferings of CHRIST and the glory which shall follow. Oh for grace to draw near and see this great sight! We should read reverently, putting off our shoes from off our feet as Moses did at the burning bush, for if there be holy ground anywhere in Scripture it is in this psalm." -- Charles H. Spurgeon

This is the only one of the Seven Words on the Cross recorded by both Mark and Matthew; the same words occur in the opening sentences of the Twenty-second Psalm, yet neither evangelist refers to them as a fulfilment of prophecy. After six hours of agony in body and soul on the Cross this cry escaped our Saviour's lips. His first word was: "**Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do**" (Luke 23:34) -- a prayer for pardon. His second word a promise of peace; "**To day shalt thou be with me in paradise**" (vs. 43). His third word one of tender solicitude to and for His mother: "**Woman behold thy son ... [son] behold thy mother**" (John 19:26), then the thick darkness fell. And before the three last words followed in rapid succession: "**I thirst**" (vs. 28), "**It is finished,**" (vs. 30), "**Father into thy hands I commend my spirit**" (Luke 23:46) -- there was the cry of anguish. "**My God, my God, why? ...**"

"For none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed,
Or how dark was the night that the Lord passed through
Ere He found the sheep that was lost."

That there is something of singular force and feeling in these words of JESUS on the Cross is evident from the fact that the two evangelists have studiously, and only in this case, given the very words of the language our Lord used: "**Eli, Eli, lama Sabachthani.**"

Nowhere else, moreover, in Scripture do we find this repetition of the words save in the Messianic Psalm. The cry expresses suffering that was never at any other time felt in this world

and never will be again.

There is a tradition, referred to by Ludolf the Carthusian, as early as the fourteenth century, that our Lord, hanging on the Cross, began repeating the words of the Twenty-second Psalm and continued His meditation until He came to the fifth verse of the Thirty-first Psalm: "**Into thine hand I commit my spirit.**"

Aside from this fancy, there is no doubt that in the Psalms, which were in CHRIST's heart and often on His lips, we find an interpretation of His life and His Messianic consciousness as in no other book. It is true that we have in this Twenty-second Psalm a description of the crucifixion in language that makes one ask is it history or prophecy?

Strauss and others indeed say the gospel account of this incident is therefore obviously mythical, and it never took place but was dragged in to prove the fulfilment of another Old Testament passage!

To the believer, however, this cry is a revelation of the deep suffering and anguish our Saviour bore, and a proof of His infinite love for sinners. It challenges us, with all the saints, to be strong to comprehend "**what is the length and breadth and height and depth of the love of GOD which passeth knowledge.**"

If the Cross is the central Truth of the New Testament, this cry is the heart of this truth and its deepest expression. This is the holy of holies to the reverent reader of the story of the passion.

Spurgeon rightly says: "We must lay emphasis on every word of this saddest of all utterances. 'Why?' What is the great cause of such a strange fact as for GOD to leave His own SON at such a time and in such a plight? There was no cause in Him, why then was He deserted? 'Hast,' it is done, and the Saviour is feeling its dread effect as He asks the question; it is surely true, but how mysterious! It was no threatening of forsaking which made the great Surety cry aloud, He endured that forsaking in very deed. 'Thou': I can understand why traitorous Judas and timid Peter should be gone, but Thou, My GOD, My faithful friend, how canst Thou leave me? This is the worst of all, yea, worse than all put together. Hell itself has for its fiercest flame the separation of the soul from GOD. 'Forsaken': if Thou hadst chastened I might bear it, for Thy face would shine; but to forsake me utterly, ah! why is this? 'Me': Thine innocent, obedient, suffering SON, why leavest Thou Me to perish? A sight of self seen by penitence, and of JESUS on the Cross seen by faith will best expound this question. JESUS is forsaken because our sins had separated between us and our GOD."

To understand what suffering of body and mind and soul were in that cry of anguish we must recall the circumstances.

Crucifixion was the most hideous torture devised by the old world and the extreme penalty of Roman criminal justice. It included physical agony and disgrace. The former due to the unnatural posture of the body, the throbbing pain of nail-pierced hands and feet, feverish thirst and gradual exhaustion and death.

The disgrace was doubly so to one of the Jewish race, for the Cross was an object of horror and

typical of GOD's curse: "**Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree**" (Galatians 3:13) and "**His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God;) that thy land be not defiled, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance**" (Deuteronomy 21:23).

Add to all this the awful contrast between CHRIST's holiness, innocence and divine dignity and the brutal jeers, mockery and contempt hurled at the helpless victim by those that stood beneath the Cross and even by those who hung at His side: "**The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth**" (Matthew 27:44) and "**And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us**" (Luke 23:39).

The chief priests led in mocking Him: "**And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God**" (Luke 23:35). And for answer there came gloom -- a supernatural darkness, over all the scene from the sixth to the ninth hour. After these three hours of darkness and out of the darkness of His lonely agony JESUS cried with a loud voice: "**My God, my God, why? ...**"

Melancthon and other Reformers explain this cry as evidence that CHRIST experienced in His human soul the divine wrath against sin.

Others say it was an indication that His political plans had failed, the cry of a deeply disappointed patriot.

Others, including Schleiermacher, say it was the opening sentence of the great lamentation psalm with its sublime conclusion, that JESUS uttered as proof of His Messiahship.

Meyer says that because of the agony of being rejected of men "His consciousness of union with GOD was for the moment overcome."

Olhausen speaks of "actual, objective, momentary abandonment by GOD."

Dr. Philip Schaff sees in this experience of CHRIST an intensified renewal of His vicarious sufferings: "It was a divine human experience of sin and death in their inner connection and universal significance for the race by one who was perfectly pure and holy, a mysterious and indescribable anguish of the body and soul in immediate prospect of, and in actual wrestling with, death as the wages of sin and the culmination of all misery of man, of which the Saviour was free, but which He voluntarily assumed from infinite love in behalf of the race."

Surely it was not, as Moslems often tell us, due to CHRIST's fear of death and lack of moral courage to face the issue. Even the infidel, Jean Jacques Rousseau, knew better and exclaimed: "If Socrates died like a philosopher, JESUS of Nazareth died like a GOD."

Without the belief that JESUS bore our sins in His body on the tree, without the acceptance of the vicarious element in His death, the cry on the Cross is inexplicable. But if JESUS was the Lamb of GOD and GOD laid on Him the iniquity of us all, we have a key to the mystery of such suffering.

If the death of CHRIST was only that of a great martyr for the truth the cry is strangely out of place. But if He died, the just for the unjust, if "**He was made sin for us,**" then our own sins and the sins of the whole world wrung from our Saviour the cry of anguish and loneliness.

What is the Atonement? "It is the satisfaction rendered to the justice of GOD for man's sin by the substituted penal suffering of His well-beloved SON."

If we dislike such a theological definition we may find the same great truth expressed in the liturgies of the Church used at the Lord's Supper, when we commemorate His death. What could be more beautiful than the interpretation of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands: "We believe that He suffered His blessed body to be nailed on the Cross that He might affix thereon the handwriting of our sins; that He also took upon Himself the curse due to us that He might fill us with His blessings. And humbled Himself unto the deepest reproach and pains of hell, both in body and soul, on the tree of the Cross when He cried out with a loud voice, '**My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?**' that we might be accepted of GOD and never be forsaken of Him."

In the last stanza of Mrs. Browning's poem on the grave of Cowper, we have the same thought:

"Yes, once Immanuel's orphan cry His universe hath shaken,
It went up single, echoless, My GOD I am forsaken.
It went up, from the holy lips, amid the lost creation,
That of the lost no son should use those words of desolation."

"He hath laid on him the iniquities of us all" --

the guilt,
the stain,
the hurt,
the remorse.

All our failings,
shortcomings,
falls,
offences,
trespasses,
transgressions,
debts,
sins,
faults,
ignorances,
pollutions,
unrighteousness.

We must not shrink from the awful implications of this fact. We shall never "pour contempt on all our pride" until we realize that we can only be reconciled to GOD because "**For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of**

God in him" (I Corinthians 5:21). "**Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree**" (Galatians 3:13).

It was not for our sins only but for the sins of the whole world that He was forsaken of GOD. All the sin and shame of the ages in some sense passed over Him, all its waves and its billows; deep calling unto deep. The crude lusts and darkness of ancient races back to primeval time; the long waywardness of Israel; the pride of Nineveh and Tyre; the cruelty of Egypt and Babylon; the injustice of society; the crimes of the market, the brothel and the battlefield; the betrayals of Judas and the denials of Peter and all who ever forsook JESUS; of Pilate, of Herod and of Caiaphas, the sins of humanity past, present and future.

In some mysterious way all this pressed upon His soul and gave birth to the cry of anguish. The mind which was the very tabernacle of GOD was haunted in the garden and on Calvary by the awful spectre of a world of sin. So dark, so absolute, so real, was the torture of the Cross. The sufferings of CHRIST's soul were the soul of His suffering.

"Well might the sun in darkness hide
And shut His glory in,
When CHRIST his mighty Maker died
For man, the creature's, sin."

"The death and sufferings of CHRIST was something very much more than suffering," says Forsyth; "it was atoning action. At various stages in the history of the Church -- not the Roman Catholic Church only but Protestantism also -- exaggerated stress has been laid upon the sufferings of CHRIST. But it is not a case of what He suffered, but what He did.

CHRIST's suffering was so divine a thing because He freely transmuted it into a great act. It was suffering accepted and transfigured by holy obedience under the conditions of curse and blight which sin had brought upon man according to the holiness of GOD. The suffering was a sacrifice to GOD's holiness. In so far it was penalty. But the atoning thing was not its amount or acuteness, but its obedience, its sanctity."

Yet one shrinks from analyzing the cry on the Cross. After all has been said that men can say to throw light on its significance it remains a mystery, the mystery of the Atonement. In what intelligible sense could the infinite and loving Father forsake His only begotten SON, leaving Him alone in darkness and dire need? There are some who are quite ready, too ready, to speak of CHRIST as the object of Divine wrath; and yet without careful qualifications this remains a thought painful beyond expression.

Surely never for a moment can this Divine sufferer have been the object of the Father's displeasure -- He that came from Heaven to do His will, to execute the purpose of infinite love in the redemption of a ruined world at whatever personal cost.

Never, on the contrary, was the thought of the Father fixed on the SON with more unqualified approbation and intense affection: "**Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again**" (John 10:17).

Never can He have been more thoroughly conscious that He was doing the Father's will and must be approved and could never be wholly forsaken.

Also, there was summed up in this cry of anguish all the loneliness of JESUS in the days of His flesh, a loneliness which culminated on the Cross. **"I have trodden the wine-press alone"** (Isaiah 63:3).

Lonely at His birth,
lonely in His silent years at Nazareth,
lonely in the desert and on the mountain-top.

His was the loneliness of misunderstanding,
the loneliness of leadership,
the loneliness of temptation,
the loneliness of prayer.

He was lonely in the crowd,
and lonely on the Mount of Transfiguration;
lonely in His grief and tears over Jerusalem;
most of all lonely and alone when in Gethsemane, at Gabbatha and on Golgotha.

"Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled" (Matthew 26:56), **"They hated me without a cause."** (John 15:25), **"Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand"** (Isaiah 53:10).

It was therefore CHRIST shared in the hiding of the Father's face which is the essential and the final horror of sin. **"For he was made sin for us."**

"I believe," says Robert Keable, speaking of this loneliness on the Cross, "that in a real sense He was voicing the experience of His life, an experience borne hitherto by the Man of Sorrows in the silence of His heart. No doubt it was intensified on Calvary, but the Lonely Man, who is rejected by earth because He is sinless, is rejected by GOD because He is sin. Oh, unutterable paradox of love! Oh, triumph of the wonder of His loneliness. At that ninth hour JESUS our Lord is unutterably alone in the wide range of all that is."

"Praise to the Holiest in the height,
And in the depths be praise;
In all His words most wonderful
Most sure in all His ways.
O generous love! that He who smote
In Man, for man, the foe,
The double agony in Man
For man should undergo."

~ end of chapter 6 ~