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### Seven Words

John Agee Holt

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## THE SEVEN WORDS



JOHN A. HOLT

*THE SEVEN WORDS*

1961  
BAKER BOOK HOUSE  
Grand Rapids 6, Michigan



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**THE SEVEN WORDS**

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To My Wife, Ann

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## *Preface*

The writing of another book dealing with the seven last words from the cross seems unnecessary in view of the ample amount that has already been written. Still there is justification for continued attempts because every Christian must think through his own faith and must also give expression to his conclusions. This book is based on a series of pre-Easter messages first delivered to the congregation of which I am pastor, the Luther Rice Memorial Baptist Church of Washington, D. C. As there was no thought of publication at that time, I am sure I have used ideas from other men which I now find impossible to identify or locate.

I am indebted to Dr. Clarence W. Cranford, one of my colleagues in Washington, for his suggestion which caused me to submit this manuscript for publication. I would also express appreciation to Mrs. James Stargel and Miss Naoma Mobbs for their assistance in preparing the manuscript.

John A. Holt

Washington, D. C.  
September, 1961



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# 1

## *Approaching the Cross*

*An Introduction to the Seven Last Words*

JOHN 12:23-33; 19:16-18

The novelist J. B. Priestly, while journeying across England in the early part of 1950, tells of coming to Coventry and touring its bombed out cathedral. The walls were still standing as well as some of the interior, a broken monument to the engines of war and commotion. In describing his visit the novelist used a phrase that is both arresting and thought-provoking. As they entered the cathedral, he relates, "we stepped into light instead of the familiar ecclesiastical dusk." And then he



goes on to relate that in this new light inside the sanctuary he saw a large black cross and experienced feelings that he had ceased to believe could exist.<sup>1</sup>

I could find no better words to express the purpose of these messages about the cross of our Lord than those of the novelist—"light instead of the familiar ecclesiastical dusk." Seeing the cross in a new light; this is the need for Christian people. We have looked long enough in the half twilight of theological fog and the hovering clouds of ignorance, and many of the cathedrals of our lives need to have the roofs removed that the light of heaven might come down with its penetrating and purifying rays going into every dark corner. Our purpose then is not primarily to explain the meaning of the cross, although this will receive much attention as occasion is presented, but to experience the power of the cross, for the part that we need is not expression but feeling. We have stumbled here all too often not only in dealing with the cross of Christ but in many other areas of our Christianity. The assumption is that if we cannot put something into words, we do not understand it; if we cannot describe emotions in language of communication, our feelings are unrealistic and of no value. When we cannot explain something, it merely means that we are short on explanation, and our feelings can be profound and our experiences touching the very garment of God. I like the lines where the poet said:

"Sermons and logic will never convince,  
The dark of the night drives deeper into my soul."

Therefore, let us remove the man-made barriers that keep out God's sunlight; let us no longer dwell in the

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<sup>1</sup>From *Jesus Christ and His Cross*, p. 15, by F. W. Dillistone. Copyright 1953 by W. L. Jenkins. The Westminster Press. Used by permission.

“cathedral dusk” where only the dim outlines of reality and not the sharp details of living truth can be seen. May we come again and take our places with the multitudes and observe our Lord on the cross again. We have not come to talk, we have come to listen; we have not come to receive approval for some theory, but we have come to receive the revelation of God. And so if we cannot put into language every emotion and express in words every feeling, there is no need to evade the cross once again and say, “such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain unto it.”

The approach to the cross is through the words of Jesus; and perhaps we learn even as much through the silence of Jesus. For it is significant to note that for the most part while Jesus hung on the cross he said nothing, and concerning an interpretation of the meaning of the cross either before or after Calvary he said little. Could not the reason be that the deeper and more far-reaching experiences of life often defy explanation? The comparison is interesting to remember at this point that the Bible records that God spoke in the creation of the world—“And God said . . . and there was . . .” But in redemption, God acted; words could not answer this problem; something must be DONE. What did Jesus say about the cross? With that in mind we shall be in a position to listen with greater understanding to the seven words he spoke while on the cross.

One of the first things that Jesus said about the cross was that it was to be a PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. “let him take up his cross . . .” “he that taketh not his cross . . .” Note the personal pronoun each time indicating possession and closeness. We are not just studying history when we talk about the cross—but we are studying humanity and God. More important than that,

we study an eternal reaction. If all we desire is to follow the events of Good Friday, we will do something which will be interesting to be sure, but not really significant. On the other hand, if we view the cross as a principle of life, and that principle is self-sacrifice, a principle which we can assume or reject, then we see something that is terribly up-to-date. The fruits of Christ bearing his cross will not be the same as the fruits of our cross-bearing—but the principle will be the same; and the way by which he achieved his victory will be the same.

Let us look at the cross from another angle. It is the frank picture of human nature in action. And like a mirror, the picture reveals parts of life that we do not like to see. All the pretense has been set aside, and here is human life just as it is—just as God must see us every day of our lives. Goodness receives crucifixion on contact with sin. *But that is not all*: sin does not want to admit the fact that anything wrong has been done—there are extenuating circumstances; there are justifiable reasons why we are not to be held accountable for these errors, even if someone is about to convince us that we have done the wrong. Everyone at the cross had an excuse. Pilate was giving the people what they wanted—every politician knows the meaning of this kind of conduct. The Jews were maintaining the sacred institutions of Judaism and defending the name of God from one who assumed too much. The multitude who cried for blood was only following its leadership. Herod did not have any idea of passing judgment on Jesus—he came for the weekly eleven o'clock hour of entertainment, and there is nothing wrong with that. The disciples were absent and so could not be held accountable. The only one who spoke forth in truth and faced the stark reality that he was a sinner in desperate need of

divine help was the malefactor who said to his partner in crime that we receive the just desserts of our deeds and on that confession of guilt and evil made his plea for mercy; not on the basis of what he thought he had accomplished but on the basis of exactly what he was in the eyes of God. And this was the man at the cross who was saved!

The song we call a "Spiritual" has caught the idea, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" We shall have to answer in the affirmative—I was there, and I confess my guilt. This is a personal matter, and, as we think about these seven words, we shall begin to see just how personal it will become.

But the words of Jesus tell us something else about this cross—it is a VOLUNTARY EXPERIENCE. Let the potential follower then "take up his cross." To the rich young ruler it was the same command—"sell your goods, and take up your cross." You take it up. Christ says he wants you to take your cross—it is essential if certain things in the Christian are to happen—but whether you do or not is your decision. Jesus said on another occasion, "he that taketh not his cross. . . ." Here is the other side of the picture—rejection and refusal.

Now the interesting observation concerning this part of cross-bearing is that it is just the opposite to the view of the cross that many individuals hold. There is a description spoken about people, especially those in dire circumstances, that this person certainly has his cross to bear.

Here is a widow with several small children and she is saddled with the difficult task of providing for her family without the help of her husband—and what a struggle that can be, and how many down through the years have borne heroically this burden to the glory of

God and to the benefit of children. Is this bearing the Christian cross of Jesus?

Here is a man who comes to the peak of his career and is in the position where he can make vital contribution to the betterment of mankind, but because of some tragic and unpredictable circumstance is deprived of his eyesight or his hearing and must live the remainder of his day within the curtains of darkness or in the soundless halls of silence. Think how many have borne this quirk of circumstances with heroic optimism. Witness John Milton and Ludwig van Beethoven, the one blind and the other deaf. Is this bearing the cross of Jesus?

Here is a person who discovers to his great amazement that he is the victim of an incurable disease and, like a bolt out of the blue, he does not have nearly the time one could normally expect to live, coupled with the imminent prospect of prolonged suffering. He can now give a glorious witness to his belief in the eternal values of life, or he can become the victim of despondency and despair. Is this bearing the cross of Jesus?

No, in each of these examples one vital element is missing for these folk to be the bearers of the cross of Christ—it is the element of taking it voluntarily. The widow would gladly have her husband return to his normal place in the family; the blind man would willingly awake one morning to behold the beauty of the morning sun announcing the arrival of a new day; the man in the prison house of silence would shout for joy if the faint twitter of a bird would perchance disturb his slumbers; and the victim of an incurable disease would welcome the healing hands of medical science announcing that a cure had at last been discovered.

But the thing about which Jesus speaks is not this kind of sacrifice, although it can be borne triumphantly, and

the grace of God will enable the sufferer to come through many trying hours. The cross in human personal experience then becomes what we bear willingly—and which can be set aside, if we so desire. The resignation can always be turned in, so to speak. The cross we take up for Jesus may well involve suffering, ridicule, and deprivation, but we assume it because we want to do his will. Therefore, Simon the Cyrenean, that man whom the soldiers called in to carry the cross of Jesus when the Master sank under its weight, is not the prime cross bearer of all the ages—one word in the Scriptures disqualifies him. Matthew records, “him they compelled to bear the cross” (27:32). The word is “compel.” You will never be compelled to take up your cross and follow Christ—“If any man would come after me, let *him* take up his cross and follow.”

Why then have not more borne the cross of Christ? They have not chosen to take it up. The joys and the deep and abiding satisfactions that come in the wake of voluntary sacrifice for the cause of Christ are foreign to many people because they choose not to do it. No one will ever force your hand at this point. Our entry into the Christian Kingdom is through a voluntary faith; and our growth in the Christian graces is through a voluntary cross. And let me say quietly but yet emphatically that as long as our decisions and actions are based on the creed of comfort and carried out on the levels of convenience, the meaning of the cross will ever be foreign to our experience. What is this but the effort to have religion without sacrifice and Christianity without tears—and this cannot be done because life is not like that—reality will not permit it.

We need to add one more word to the sentence; the cross is a personal experience, it is a voluntary ex-

perience, *the cross is a personal voluntary experience involving death!* And it is that part that involves the dying that is the most difficult to attain. I hasten to add that death is not used here in the usual sense—for most people do not die voluntarily—in fact we do just the opposite. We live as long as possible, and rightly so, for the Bible teaches the sacredness of human life and we believe the decision for its termination should rest with God, or at least outside our own desires. Death can come in other forms. Some of the strangest things that Jesus said are in this connection: “Except a grain of wheat fall to the ground and die, it abideth alone, but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” (John 12:24). “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 16:25).

Jesus is not talking here about physical suicide, nor the careless living of life that invites unnecessary and foolish danger—far from it. He is speaking of something infinitely more difficult. He means the death of unholy desire, selfish ambition, that which makes impossible the growth of the Christian spirit within the heart and that which prevents one from giving his best to the cause of the Master. Now most of us would rather not die physically—in the body—but is it not true that we fear more profoundly the death of our own desire to a far greater degree? But to be sure the death of the body will come, whether we want it or not—but the death of unholy desire may never come unless it is of our own choosing.

The cross then in this connection involves the change and redirection of a man's life—we become a “new creature” as Paul so well put it. And the task is of such Herculean size that at once we realize that we shall

need help—our reply comes back to God, how can I help what I am, how can I change what I want, how can I master the unholy passion that consumes and wins control no matter how hard I try? Paul closes the seventh chapter of Romans with the same question after pursuing the same kind of reasoning, and he cries out in desperation first and then in victory when he realizes how it shall come about: "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Then Paul must have paused for a moment, and the agonizing frown on his face was changed to the smile of confident victory—there was an answer to his question. "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:24-25). J. B. Phillips renders the answer, "I thank God there is a way out through Jesus Christ our Lord." We can win this great struggle—not alone—but with the power of Christ a Christian can even change his desires—he can be "born again."

Death then in this sense becomes a vital part of being a Christian—and it is not at all surprising to find this same idea as the central symbolism of baptism—for the cross and the baptistry are two sides of the same process. Little wonder then that Jesus commanded that we be placed under water as the symbol of our burial to sin and then lifted out as a symbol of our newness in life with his resurrection.

So then as we approach the cross again bearing in mind what Jesus has said about the cross, we are now ready to listen to what Jesus will say while he is on the cross. It is one thing to give a lecture; it is something again to move into the laboratory and demonstrate the lecture. How will he act when the hand of the enemy is upon him, and what will he say when the curse of the critic is uttered? In the six hours that Jesus hung on the



cross he spoke seven times—and in these seven last words we have an accurate summary of his life and teachings. When these seven words are considered in the framework of what he was doing for the redemption of the world, we find here the clearest picture of what God is like—for the cross more than anything else in the Bible presents God as one of mercy and love; but also here is the clearest picture in the Bible of what man is like. And this one is not nearly so appealing.

Our generation needs to come back to the cross and there to realize that the spiritual problem is the real one—economics and politicians and diplomacy and the balance of power among the nations—these are all first rate issues, but the one that really matters is the one that is settled on Calvary's hill—SIN. Paul summed it up in I Corinthians 1:18: "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish, foolishness; but unto us which are saved, it is the power of God."

## *The First Word: Forgiveness*

*“Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them;  
for they know not what they do. . . .”* LUKE 23:34

Jesus spoke seven sentences, or seven words as we term them, in those six hours while on the cross, and the over-all effect is interesting. The first three were spoken in behalf of others, thus giving the final fulfillment and demonstration to what Jesus had taught throughout all his public ministry. He practiced what he expected his followers to practice. The first word was a prayer for his enemies—“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” The second word was a provision of

salvation for the dying malefactor, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." The third word was a statement of relationships and one in which he made provision for his mother, "Woman, behold thy son!" and then to the disciple, "Behold thy mother!"

The last four words on the cross were spoken concerning his own feelings and his own work—they were personal. The fourth word was the deep and mysterious utterance which Jesus gave when he became completely identified with humanity and took our position in respect to God—"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The fifth word was one of human suffering—"I thirst." The sixth word stated his fulfillment and completion of purpose as the curtain of redemption is finally rung down—"It is finished." The seventh word is one of personal triumph which can be uttered by all who have taken Christ as Savior and Lord—"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

It is not surprising that the first word that Jesus should speak during his crucifixion was a prayer. He had prayed all his life, and even a casual study of the gospels reveals that it was not unusual for Jesus to pray alone far into the night; how much more then would he commune with his Father in the supreme test of his ministry and purpose. The first word from the cross was a prayer, and the second was in answer to a prayer.

We know from our experience with human nature that people will pray in dire circumstances such as the one through which Jesus was passing; they will pray then when they would not dream of praying at any other time. And thus their very attempt with religion and the spiritual reveals the hollowness of their faith; when the ground gives way beneath our feet and when the last visible means of support is wrenched from our

fingers, we pray. Even then, when we begin to do the right things, and we surely ought to pray in that kind of difficult circumstance, we do not pray like Jesus prayed. Let us look at that prayer and see the pivot around which it revolves; for in this prayer of Jesus we have the gateway into the kingdom of God, and it is the gate by which each of us must enter—the *gate of forgiven sin!* How like Jesus to begin at the beginning and utter, as the first word from his cross, the first factor that makes possible the redemption of the human soul, the fact that God will *forgive*.

Consider first then *to whom Jesus prayed*. And while the fact that Jesus prayed to God and called him by the usual term of “father” may not seem significant, yet when considered against the background of the cross, and the events of the day, there is something worth noting about the one to whom our Lord prayed.

Prayer is one of the clearest recognitions of the sovereignty of God; the fact of prayer carries with it the attribute of power. And if there was ever a time in the life of Jesus when all seemed lost, when righteousness seemed to be trampled under foot and the causes of sin could wave their triumphant banners, the day of the cross was that day. How could God be God and let a thing like this happen? Jesus surely could have entertained such thinking, for this is exactly the way our mind has turned in circumstances with far less provocation. Many a man has come to the place in his life experience as he faced that for which no explanation could be given, and which gave every evidence of violating the principle of the goodness of God, and said within himself, if that is the way things are, I cannot believe in the goodness of God! And this is nothing more than saying God is not supreme, his will is not

sovereign, his way does not materialize—or else he would not let this thing happen.

But not so with Jesus—for if the cross teaches us no other lesson, we can learn again that the will of God is not only supreme but is completely beneficent for the welfare of humanity. In looking back on that day at Calvary we now see that out of this supreme tragedy God was able to work the supreme blessing. And so when faith has nothing on which to place its hopes, and blackness is all about us, God will send his light to push back the darkness, and he will eventually have his way even though our minds are often unable to see the end or fathom the plan. William Cowper has expressed it in these lines—“Light Shining out of Darkness,”:

God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants his footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.  
Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never ending skill,  
He treasures up his bright designs,  
And works his sovereign will.

If at this moment Jesus with innocence and complete obedience, could believe in the fatherhood of God, and so address him in his prayer, surely in our overwhelming guilt and willful disobedience, we also can believe in the fatherhood and the sovereignty of God. Therefore, no matter how sharp may be the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, nor how bitter may be the compulsions of circumstance, God is still our father and we can begin our prayer, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.”

If the first word from the cross teaches us nothing

else, let it say with undeniable force that life will never deal us blows and bring us into circumstance in which we will be unable to say "Our Father." If Christ could call God Father on Calvary, then the relationship can never be broken.

Note also, *for whom* Jesus prayed in this first word from the cross. Although it was not uncommon for persons in moments of great anguish to cry out, and even to voice prayers in moments like these, prayers for the condemnation of humanity in general and for their persecutors in particular; but for prayer to be offered in behalf of those who had caused one's torment, this was entirely unique. And yet, this is what Jesus does in this prayer for his enemies. In his teachings he had said this is what men ought to do; love your enemies, and pray for them which persecute you. And so when the moment arrived when the world might see if Jesus believed in and practiced what he taught, they now witnessed the demonstration; how good it is when the lecture of a life and the laboratory of a life teach the same lesson.

Not only did Jesus pray for those who had wronged him, he also gave an argument in their behalf, and the argument was that these men who lifted his cross were unconscious of the implications of their deeds. Of course the soldiers did not know who Jesus was, and the Roman government had not gone into the intricacies of the Hebrew religion, and even the chief priests and Scribes, who ought to have recognized Jesus as the Messiah, still failed to see because their eyes were blinded by prejudice and greed. And I say that in order to say this, namely, it is reassuring to realize that God takes into consideration the ignorance of humanity in dealing with the guilt of our sins. He knows when we do not

understand, and of course the unintentional does not deserve the scorn of condemnation as do the acts of premeditation.

There have been those who have looked at this prayer of Jesus for his persecutors and concluded that thereby they are relieved of the responsibility of their sin. After all, if we do something in ignorance, it does not count! We are not to be held accountable. But Jesus does not say here that these men are doing no wrong—far from it. Everyone of them knew that he was violating the laws of rightness and decency. Pilate admitted that Jesus did not deserve death—but he gave the decree anyway; the Jews could quote their decalogue quickly where it said, “thou shalt not kill.” What Jesus says and what he pleads is that they did not realize the full *implications* of their crime. And here is where time touches eternity, so to speak, for Jesus could pray that prayer about a great many more sins than that of his own crucifixion. Think of the sins of neglect and omission that were committed this very morning, and the people who committed them would be the last to see the results of their evil. Many a lad suffered because a parent neglected to guide his footsteps into the house of the Lord, and when that omission becomes a weekly routine, who can measure the damage of it? One of the things we do not have the ability to see in this life is the ultimate conclusion of our wrong choices and neglected virtues—but in a world of cause and effect it goes on until events have run their course.

Now the implications of this prayer of Jesus as applied unto life today are many—for these men around the cross were not the only men who committed sin without realizing what was involved. And the seriousness of it is seen when we remember that conscious or unconscious,

intentional or unintentional, the end result of evil is the same. Was Jesus any less crucified because these soldiers and the rest saw nothing but a passing event in the line of duty? Was the pain any less excruciating? Of course not. The Bible never takes lightly the fact of sin, and Jesus never passed it by with the view that if he ignored it, it would quietly go away. The cross was a fact, and man's decision had been made all down the line that made the cross a reality—but *sin does not have the last word*. These men are guilty—but they are not hopeless—even the men whose hammer drove the nails, and whose voices cried out "let him be crucified," and whose minds determined to put to death the Son of God—even these are not hopeless. And if these men can be forgiven, then there is hope for every mortal who walks this earth. Why? Because God *forgives sin!*

Here then is the real message of this first word from the cross—*God's forgiveness*. And the truth of it is supported when we realize that Jesus did not, and would not ask for that which God could not do. This is a prayer without qualifying condition. In the garden of Gethesemane our Lord had prayed—"If it be possible, let this cup pass." And God's answer was that it was not possible—man being what he is as a free agent, and God being what he is as a moral being, the cross becomes inevitable. But in this first word from the cross there is no "if." The fact that God can forgive is the underlying assumption; whether these men will ever make their confession of guilt is not known at all, but if that confession is made, God's forgiveness can be counted on without exception.

Now the fact that this word comes first is not mere chance, for if this first word had been left out, then the rest of the work of the cross would be rendered



unnecessary. If God will not forgive, then we are utterly hopeless, for as Paul has said in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." The humbling fact remains that we shall find the gateway into the kingdom of God at the same place that these who crucified our Lord will find it—a forgiving heavenly father. No wonder the gospel is described as "good news." The sinner can be forgiven—this is the good news of Christianity.

A word of explanation needs to be injected at this point—and that word is a question: what is forgiveness? Does it mean that things will be just as they were before the sin was committed, or neglect as the case may be? Does it mean that God will close his eyes and overlook the transgressor and his transgression? Forgiveness means that a *relationship* is restored. It means that sin has been faced for exactly what it is, and for the damage that it does, but the relationship is still intact. We see this illustrated every day in the context of the family relationship, for family life revolves about the position of maintaining the relationships through forgiveness; and when there is a member of the family who will not practice forgiveness (or accept it for that matter) he will eventually become absented from all the rest, and the separating barriers of unforgiven sin will completely cut him off from fellowship—and he will abide alone. And what is true of the human family, is true also of the church family. For when we will not practice forgiveness among ourselves, our church will soon become cold and ineffective. At this point Jesus said one of his most unrelenting sentences following the model prayer: "if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:15).

The first word from the cross was spoken first because

it comes first. Without forgiveness there is no gospel; without forgiveness on God's part man is without hope; but God does forgive through Christ—and for that we are profoundly grateful.

How desperately our world needs to hear this first word from the cross—not only in our individual relationships to God, but in our relationships with our fellowman. Everyone of us needs to pray the prayer of Jesus when people unintentionally wrong us, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."



## *The Second Word: Salvation*

*“And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise.”*  
LUKE 23:43

If the first word that Jesus spoke from the cross was a prayer, the second word was in answer to a prayer, a prayer offered by one of the men who was crucified along with Jesus. By what arrangement Jesus was placed on the center cross we are not told. Whether by accident or by deliberate choice cannot be known for certainty. Jesus was by far the most famous of the three, and it could easily have been the result of his persecutors

making their final effort to heap indignity upon this man in whom they could find no fault. Had not Jesus said in public that he came to call sinners and not the righteous to repentance? Was not one of the charges leveled against him phrased in those words in Luke 15:2 "this man receiveth sinners and eateth with them"? And inasmuch as these things were true, it was fitting that he should die with sinners. And thus even in the small details of the cross there is significance, for the Psalmist had said "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee" (Psalm 76:10). Jesus had come to save sinners, and as he died for them he would not hold back from dying with them. He is still in the midst of sinners to this day, for he is their friend and their hope.

Who was the man behind this noble prayer, "Jesus, remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom"? (ASV). The common conception is that this man was a cut throat criminal, but upon more careful examination of the gospels this does not seem to be the case. He is called a "malefactor," the same term applied to Jesus in John 18:30 where they said, "if he were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered him." This man was guilty of crime, but his crime had noble purpose. He was one of a group that was attempting to cast off the bondage of Rome, and in his misdirected enthusiasm he had committed one crime in order to correct another. So often the reformer will do this, and will allow the end to justify the means when he ought to let the end determine the means; and there are few things more dangerous than misdirected enthusiasm, and while zeal is very difficult to engender, it is even more difficult to stop.

If we know then who this man was, the next question is what kind of man was he? That he was a man of some

moral scruples we can be sure. He reminded his partner in crime that he ought to fear God (Luke 23:40), and he also was conscious of the fact that they deserved the punishment they were receiving, "we receive the due reward of our deeds" (Luke 23:41). But the two things that stand out and give body as well as depth to his prayer to Jesus are: First, the way he addressed Jesus. It is significant that this is the only place in the gospel records that Jesus is so addressed. He is called Master, Rabbi, Teacher, Jesus thou Son of David, Jesus of Nazareth, but no one else ever called him by the simple name of *Jesus*. Whether this refers to previous contact or is the only part of the superscription that remained in his mind we do not know. But one thing we do know, he had heard Jesus offer this prayer for his enemies, and he had seen the reaction of the Lord to the jeering of the multitude.

The second remarkable thing about this malefactor is his insight. He might well be called the first great Christian theologian. "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" (Luke 23:42)—a kingdom at a time like this—Lord, at a time like this. No one else around the cross seemed to think that there was any future to Jesus at this moment—but here was a man who believed that the day would come when Jesus would come into his kingdom. We have praised much the great theologians for their observations, Calvin and Luther and others, but this man saw more with so little light than anyone else.

In response to this prayer Jesus gave the second word, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." First, this second word tells us something about Jesus. Our Lord was never closer to his natural element than when he dealt with one man about his own particular personal

problem, and this second word from the cross is only another illustration of what had been true during the entire ministry of Jesus. Perhaps the best words that Jesus spoke were delivered to one person, to Nicodemus or the woman at the well, or three disciples, or Zacchaeus. This has been the genius of Christianity all down the ages, that people are not dispensed with in great throngs, but one by one, as needs vary, as problems arise. And just as Jesus is at his best when he brings the gospel message to bear upon one man, so also will the Christian church be at its best, when there is the personal touch to its message. The public pulpit has its function, and things can be said there in a manner that cannot be duplicated in any other setting; the classroom has its unique function, the tent meeting—all can give their peculiar word—but nothing can replace the testimony of one person to one other person.

Furthermore, our Lord was not too preoccupied at the moment to hear the request of this dying man. This becomes significant when you bear in mind that which Jesus was accomplishing at Calvary. Jesus was effecting the redemption of mankind; he was fulfilling one era in history and inaugurating another era; he was entering into the holy of holies as the high priest for the believer and when he emerged from that inner sanctum, the curtain would be parted never to be closed again; Christ was abolishing the human priesthood on the cross, and the New Testament Christianity will thus have no priest; he was shedding his blood for the last time—"once and for all" as the writer to the Hebrews would phrase it. Even then with the vast work of redemption, Jesus took the time to hear the prayer of a lost man. What a gentle but firm rebuke this is upon the fact that so often we hide behind the hedge of being too busy to

practice evangelism, too preoccupied to give our witness for our Lord. We ought not to be that busy. But who in the inner circle, especially of churches today, is not concerned with this difficulty faced by sincere people? And let me say in passing that if we add as much organizational machinery to the churches in the next 25 years as has been added in the past quarter of a century, the top level leadership of a church will be precluded from the work of personal evangelism.

But the most interesting thing this second word tells us about Jesus is the way in which he touched this malefactor. Jesus used many methods, but the one here is full of possibility at all times. The dying man spoke first; and this means something. That which drew him to Jesus was not an argument, or a quotation, or in this case even an invitation. He was drawn by the quality of life which he saw in this man on the center cross; by his reaction to the scoffing of the throngs and his lack of bitterness to personal injustice. Jesus did not answer the critics; he did not condemn the persecutor. And therefore, let it be said quietly but firmly, this is evangelism at its best. When the lost man looks at the saved man, and he is interested—where can there be more effective testimony? I believe that this is one way that God wanted the Kingdom to expand, and this is one power which the fellowship of the church should exert; its very presence in society would cause those who observed the lives of church people to realize that the Christian has something which the unchristian fails to possess. We cannot hide the intrinsic value of our Christianity, and its power or its weakness will be known. We witness by what we are—and so shall it ever be.

The second word tells us something about being



saved. Often the question is raised: can a person be saved at the last minute? Can one be drawn into the kingdom in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye? The answer is an unqualified "yes." This man had not learned a catechism; he had not been examined by a committee. Nowhere in the New Testament is there a time limit set upon one being saved; much is said about the fulfillment of God's conditions, but there is no restriction to the effect that a waiting period is involved. Whenever, we will "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," we shall be saved—*then!* Not at some future date.

Now, there have been those who have said, if that be the case, if one can be saved at the last minute, then I shall wait until the last minute to come; there are things I want to do, places I want to go, persons with whom I want to associate, and I want to do all these things first, and before I tie myself down with this Christian faith, I shall engage in these activities, then I will accept Christ and be saved.

I would remind this person of three things: First, if we purposely put off our acceptance of Christ, we will no more desire to accept Christ then than we do now. In fact, the probability is that in future years, the call of Christ will have no appeal whatsoever, and we shall be able to turn a deaf ear without disturbing conscience in the least. Second, if we consider the Christian way of life as that which "cramps our style" so to speak, it means that we do not understand Christianity in the least. For Jesus said just the opposite about life and his coming—"I am come that ye might have life and have it more abundantly." Christianity removes the harmful, and adds the beneficial on every count. And third, bear in mind also, that there were two thieves on those crosses. Only one was touched by what he saw and

heard—the other joined in with the multitudes in deriding Jesus. If one of the malefactors on the cross teaches us that the presence of Jesus can result in salvation, the other teaches the opposite lesson—the result can be condemnation.

But the point that ought to be emphasized about the salvation of this man is that he was saved in the same manner as anyone else is saved. There was no special dispensation decree that he might enter in; he repented and he exercised faith, and this is all that any of us can do, for we are sinners and the only difference is in degree and not in kind. Whenever we are willing to stop pretending, assume the obligations and results of our sins—in short be truthful, the gateway of forgiveness and the door of salvation will open. Here was a man who pleaded guilty as charged, and the divine judge of the universe therefore declared him not guilty—he was still the instigator and perpetrator of his evil, but it would not be laid to his account. Also in his plea was the recognition and confidence in the Lord of a new kingdom—Jesus. What is repentance? Turning from sin to God. What is faith? Tying life to God through Christ. And this is what the dying malefactor had done in his own simple way. Had he lived, his life would have been vastly different from what it had been, and Jesus in his divine wisdom would know this. His life had been turned around, “converted” is the term so often used. He did not enter by a special door—but the way that all shall enter. Paul, the Apostle, and the thief on the cross were saved by the same plan!

The second word also tells us something about the gospel. The cross has a way of testing things; the Jewish religion was given a severe test, Roman law was put to the test, the devotion of Jesus to the will of his father

was tested, the loyalty of the disciples in this trying hour, but the gospel of Christ was also severely tested. And the test is this: here is a man with a few hours to live, and he has seen Christ in his power and himself in his sin. Does the gospel have a word of hope for this man? Let it be said forcefully that not every gospel that goes under the guise of Christianity can pass this test successfully? There are some systems of religion that will have to tell this man, I am sorry, you have waited too long—there is not time, there is not time! The gospel that says you have to produce good works before you can be accepted in God's sight has no word for this man. The gospel that prescribes certain ceremonies prior to entering the kingdom of heaven has no word for this man. The gospel that is based on intellectual comprehension of doctrine and ethics has no word for this man. The gospel based on social reform not only has no word for this man but has no concern for it is too late to reform his character. But the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ has a word for this moment—and that word is the second one from the cross—"Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." The gospel has passed perhaps its most severe test, and the promise that Jesus had spoken prior to Calvary is true: "Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37). This man came in the right way and the right attitude—and he was received.

Let it be said in passing that here is always one of the acid tests of our Christianity. When we face the problems that vitally effect life, let the times be few and far between when our reply is, "we have no comment." The Christian church can do and has done much damage by speaking out of turn and saying the wrong thing—but never is so much damage done as when the Christian church remains silent when it ought to speak. Remem-

ber, a chain only has to break at one point to lose its strength, and time and time again the church has faced great issues, on which if they had had no comment, irreparable damage would have resulted. Jesus did have a word; his gospel did have the reply—this man could be saved—there is hope as long as there is life.

But not only does our gospel have a word of hope for this man, a hope based on his own response, just as our Christian hope is based on our response, this second word from the cross has a word of assurance. Job's question is answered: "if a man die shall he live again?" Is there such a thing as immortality. Jesus says there is—and on the first Easter morning, he shall demonstrate that there is. And the immortality Jesus refers to here is personal—not that of race or otherwise, but personal—"thou shalt be with me." Jesus said then, "you and I will be together." This leaves out so many of the details of heaven and immortality, but it says enough. I shall be I, and you shall be you—but the main thing: the Christian shall be with Jesus. Does it not become clear then that it is necessary that we love the things that Jesus loved; that we do the things that Jesus wants done. Let me put it bluntly but plainly: how can you want to spend an eternity with Jesus and at the same time dread to spend one or two hours a week in his church? To accept Christ is to love him. And he loved the church, and so must we as we support it, work in it, and sacrifice for it.

This word tells us that in the gospel of Christ, we can be saved the moment our belief begins. Jesus said, "Today, shalt thou be with me." The story is told of a pastor talking with a woman about accepting Christ and in the course of the conversation he remarked that God had set a time when he would save her. She seemed a

bit surprised, and the pastor asked if she would like to know when it would be. She was intensely interested. The time is *now*, the time is *now*!

Isaiah 1:18, "Come *now* let us reason together saith the Lord, though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow, though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

II Corinthians 6:2, "Behold, now is the acceptable time, behold now is the day of salvation."

Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus."

## *The Third Word: Relationships*

*“Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! . . . ”* JOHN 19:26, 27

The third word that Jesus spoke on the cross was spoken to persons who had gathered to witness the crucifixion. This was the only sentence so addressed. He prayed, he uttered principles, he voiced suffering, he answered one of the men crucified along with him; but this third word was directed to individuals who stood watching. It was a word that provided for the care of his mother, and also stated the kind of relationship that was to exist among members of his kingdom. The

pattern of the kingdom of God is based on the family pattern.

We have made much of what people saw when they gazed at the cross and witnessed the death of the innocent. The other side of that is also interesting; what did Jesus see when he looked down from the cross? Or better still, whom did Jesus see? So far as we are able to determine, Jesus saw four people whom he knew: his mother, his mother's sister, Mary Magdalene, and John. What a comfort the presence of these must have been; they said nothing, they offered no explanation, they had no power to ease the situation at all, but they came, and their presence spoke more than could be put into words. On the other hand, some were conspicuous by their absence, and when Jesus looked down from the cross his eye must have gone through the sea of strange faces many times searching for his disciples. But they were not there; strange prophecy of that which must happen ten thousand times ten thousand ever since that day, the eye of Jesus searching for those who by their own profession of loyalty ought to be present.

Now the fact that in this downward look of Jesus and in this recognition of familiar faces there is indication that Jesus had not lost the perspective of the moment. The strange blend of his deity and his humanity held to the very last, and just as he had lived a life that continually made provision for the needs of others, so now Jesus recognized the great sorrow and need of his mother and reacts accordingly. It was hard for any mother to witness her son's death; but especially the death of a common criminal; for the cross at this time had no glory about it—only shame and despair. Jesus seemed to know that Mary, who perhaps understood him better than anyone else, would need help from now

on, and John who also understood Jesus to a greater degree than the others as evidenced in his gospel of later years, would need help. And his direction is that they look after each other because of their common bond with him. I do not believe that it is mere chance that Jesus gave Mary into the company of John, just so she might have someone with whom she might converse; but here were two that understood in part the Son of God—and that understanding and insight does something to their relationship with each other.

What then did Jesus actually say in this third word, and John is the only gospel which records it? Jesus said unto his mother, "Woman, behold thy son." Then he said to John, "behold thy mother." The newer translations phrase it more clearly, and they are about the same, but Phillips renders the verses—"and Jesus said to his mother, 'Look, he will be your son.' And he said to the disciple—'and she is to be your mother.' " Now these words become significant when you remember that Mary and John were not related by blood ties at all. John is not the physical son of Mary, and Jesus is not talking about this either. And also, when you bear in mind that the actual mother of John was present at the cross. (Matthew 27:55-56). "and many women were there afar off . . . the mother of Zebedee's children." But Jesus in spite of this fact refers to John and Mary in the pattern of the family. What Jesus is saying then in this third word from the cross is that when individuals become members of his kingdom, they also become members of the same spiritual family. What then is the kingdom of heaven like? It is like a family in the best and noblest illustrations of families as we know them in human life.

Of all the things in everyday life that every person



knows about and of which every person is a part Jesus selects the human family to teach his great truth about the *relationships of spiritual life*. And just as the Ten Commandments, when they speak of the family use universal language—"Honor thy father and thy mother," for everybody has parents, so Jesus speaks universal language, for everyone can make the comparison of human family ties to the spiritual family.

Jesus is placing tremendous emphasis upon the importance of the family. He does this in spite of the fact that there were those in his day who would have replied in just the opposite vein. I say that because there are those in every generation who have a family loyalty that is possessive and selfish and works to the detriment of the individual not to mention the kingdom of God. Because the family is so noble and so important it is so easy to allow it to become the end of living and absorb every worthy impulse. Many a family does not find itself in the Lord's House on the Lord's Day simply because that is the only day which their schedule allows them to be together as a family. And there are parents and grandparents who would unhesitatingly lay down their own lives for their children, and this is entirely commendable, and yet these same parents will not make even a small effort to tell their young children about Jesus and introduce them to the fellowship of the church. Remember in the parable of the great supper, one of the excuses offered was that one of the persons invited refused the invitation of God because he had to look after his family.

Jesus magnifies everything in human life that he touches, and the family is no exception, but he always magnifies in the light of God first. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God. . . ." And likewise today we need to

magnify the family relationship on human terms, and we need to take the hint from Jesus that here is the most important institution in the world. The very fact that Jesus selects this pattern for his kingdom is indication enough of its importance. I do not need to labor the point that unless some drastic steps are being taken to renew the unity and solidarity of the home, and to restore again the wholesome relationship of parent and child, the outcome of American civilization is not difficult to predict. In a day when we can blast continents out of existence by remote control, and send rockets into outer space, and soon we shall be able to communicate with the moon if there is anybody up there, and if not, we shall put somebody there; and yet in that same day fathers cannot talk to their sons, and mothers have difficulty in establishing contact with their daughters. Like ancient Rome and Julius Caesar of old, we shall wire back from outer space, "I came, I saw, I conquered." But when Caesar came home—there was no victory there. The words of Jesus come as a pathetic yet timely reminder—"What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul—or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36-37).

Jesus not only magnifies the family relationship, but he uses that which is absolutely *appropriate*. For if the kingdom relationships in God's great tomorrow are what we find in the family, they parallel on so many counts. Notice the similarity between our membership in the human family and our membership in the divine family of God's children. First, we are born into both families. We use the phrase sometimes in religious circles—"twice born men." And it is a good one. Jesus stated this principle in his talk with Nicodemus when

he said, "that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit." Paul expresses the idea when he speaks about the fact that if any man is in Christ he is a *new creation*! And just as our physical birth gives us the properties of physical perception, just so our spiritual birth gives the capacities of spiritual perception. Therefore, we ought to grow and to mature; and for a time we can act the part of spiritual infants for thus we are, but as Paul would express it, "when I became a man I put away childish things." The nursery is no place for adult Christians.

Again, in both families the relationship is eternal. We cannot dissolve the bonds of relationship with our parents; our parents will always be our parents and we shall always be their children, and no power on earth can ever change that relationship. So it is when we are born into God's family; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture; and we can bring great grief to his heart or we can bring unending joy.

Also, we live on the levels of truth in both families. For the most part, we cannot pretend at home and get away with it. Our families know us too well, and you may hide something for awhile, but the veneer soon wears thin. And in the Christian family we cannot pretend either; God knows our thoughts and our motives, and we must come to him only as we are, as the hymn so well puts it—"Just as I am." We must come confessing our condition just as we are. God knows our sin—to be sure—what he desires is that we know it also, and are willing to confess it. And God will be just as our earthly parents so often are—he will love us in spite of what we are.

And then in both families, the human and the divine, what is it that establishes relationship between or among

the children? It is the fact of common parents. And furthermore, this relationship is established irrespective of the wishes or desires of those already members of that family. In large families where some children are almost grown before others even come into the circle, those who are already there do not have the say as to whether the new arrival will be one of their relations. When I was born, my older brother had a brother, and his reactions would have no bearing on the truth of that fact.

What then is the *bond of unity* in the Christian family? Common parentage. Because Christ is our Savior, we have a *relationship* with others who can say in equal sincerity that Christ is their Savior. That puts us in the same spiritual family. And we have no say whatsoever as to who comes into this great family—Christ will take care of that, for he is the doorkeeper, so to speak. Romans 8:14, 15 expresses this truth so well: "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father." So then in this third word from the cross, Jesus gathers up this great principle and gives an example of it; his mother and his disciple have one thing in common—their love for Christ—and that love does something to their relationship to each other; therefore, Jesus indicates that they are more than friends—they are members of the same spiritual family. Here Jesus *extends* the family relationship beyond the blood ties. The question then about our fellowman may well revolve about the center of not so much *who* we are, but rather *whose* we are.

Now the implications involved in this third word for the Christian are tremendous. There is so much more

here than the heart-warming incident of a son thinking of his mother in her hour of need, although that is undeniably present. For the non-Christian this third word is not significant, for he lacks the essential element of being bound to anything through Christ, but with the Christian, with the kingdom member it is not so. Let me put it this way: we are free to choose Christ as our Savior and Lord or to reject him; but once we have taken him in this capacity, we are in no way free to set the bounds and determine the involvements of this new relationship. There is then the *extension* of that which is familiar in this third word from the cross, and Jesus is practicing the ministry of "fulfilling" to a great degree—for had he not said on many occasions, "I am come not to destroy but to fulfill." And the interesting thing is that we are still in need of the same fulfillment of which the first century Hebrews had need. In their Hebrew "shema" they had been taught they were to love their neighbor as they loved themselves. Jesus had extended this idea of "neighbor" to include all whom we can help, as the parable of the Good Samaritan so clearly illustrated. But it is in the fulfillment of the New Testament that there is introduced the term "brother." And a Christian brother of course, is another Christian. Now, if we are taught in the Old Testament to love our neighbors whom we may never have seen, or known prior to contact, how much more imperative will it be that we love our brethren, who share with us the most personal and vital of all the experiences of life—a *common Savior!*

Now I do not have to elaborate upon the idea that the maintaining of good relationships and attitudes within the human family circle at times will be *difficult*.

And that which can be the best can also be the worst—I have seen families whose love and sacrifice for each other was like to that above—it was a part of heaven on earth; and I have also seen families where hatred and selfishness and pride were carried to such great extents that you wondered how the individuals involved ever remained under the same roof. Of course, sometimes they do not remain—there comes a break. It is one thing to love someone whom we have never seen and may never see; it is something again to love someone with whom we work daily and whose weaknesses we accurately know. For Christian people to look at the cross and listen to the third word, will enable them to answer more accurately the question of whether we have established a church or a club in society. For the most part we have established both, and the important thing is not that churches are clubs, for this is almost inevitable—but which comes first? If we are a club first and a church second, we are doomed to ultimate failure. And we can carry out the commands of Christ within this confined context with relatively clear consciences. But if we are a church first and a social club second, we shall be able to live up to the standards of Christian brotherhood. The essential relationship between Christians is the common bond of fellowship with Christ. This was what made the difference at Calvary. John and Mary were vitally connected with Jesus—and that made them vitally connected with each other.

The third word from the cross then was a word about human relationships—and it is not ancient history; it is a word that is desperately needed in our society and may well be the word that supplies some of the answers to pressing problems if we cared to follow

the implications to their natural conclusion. We need to bear in mind that we work with our Christian brothers across the lines of denominational differences; and we need to have attitudes which are Christian. Religious bigotry and narrowness are easy to come by as evidenced by the fact that so many have achieved this dubious distinction.

We need also to bear in mind that Christian brotherhood also crosses the lines of racial distinction; and the people with whom we deal at this point may well be members of the same spiritual family and are not only to be treated accordingly but to be so regarded. The church faces a severe test at this point, and we must be Christian at all costs, for to be unchristian with any section of humanity will hurt the cause of Christ for generations. If the church is based on the principle of a redeemed society in Christ as its cardinal point, I believe the racial question can be taken in stride as time does its healing work; on the other hand if the church is based on the principle of a social club we may discover that what we say and what we do are so far apart that we will even lose respect for ourselves.

Ultimately the family spirit is based upon spiritual unity, and Jesus was emphasizing that unity in this third word from the cross. Here was shared loyalty and mutual respect and the ability to forgive. How the modern family needs this today, and how young people need to realize that a lasting marriage must rest on this foundation instead of a romantic infatuation that is here today and gone tomorrow. And ultimately the spiritual family is tied together by spiritual things. Buildings and budgets do not make churches—oratory and anthems do not create a people peculiar unto the Lord—programs and administration do not produce

the new birth in the hearts of men. Halford Luccock describes it so well when he pictures the young husband looking at his beautiful wife across the breakfast table and remarking, "Yes, dear, I know you are beautiful and charming, but what are we having for breakfast this morning?" And the church says the same thing to its minister—we know the sound of your voice and we have heard all your pretty phrases, but what is the word of the Lord this morning, and what can you tell us about Jesus that will aid in solving the pressing problems of life? And the world says to the church, not in caustic criticism but in utter desperation, we know your lectures on the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, but show us how it works—let us see the Christian family in all its glory!

Jesus has uttered three words from the cross. How prophetic they are in undercutting the needs of humanity. He began with forgiveness—if that is not possible then all is hopeless in this world and in the next. The second word was faith—a man sees himself as a sinner and cries out to God for help. And the third word is the pattern of relationship for the new kingdom of God. It is a word spoken directly to Christian people—those who share loyalty with Christ. The forgiveness of God, our faith in Christ, the brotherhood of Christians—what a trinity for the solution of current problems.





## *The Fourth Word: Identification*

*“And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sa-bach tha-ni? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”* MATTHEW 27:46

Of the seven words that Jesus spoke from the cross the fourth is by far the most mysterious and the most difficult to interpret. The other words which embodied prayers, provision, patterns, and principles seem natural coming from Jesus; but the fourth word appears out of context and out of character. Why should Jesus of all people cry out to his father, “My God, my God,

why hast thou forsaken me?" This has long been described as the "cry of desolation"; but like so much that Jesus said, the more we ponder it, the more we begin to see that there is more here than desolation. I believe the word "*identification*" is better; for in this moment in the ministry of Jesus, more than in any other moment that he lived, Jesus became identified with the people whom he had come to save—the people of Israel, the people at the foot of the cross, and people of all time to come.

There are several things in regard to the setting of this fourth word that may prove helpful in understanding what Jesus had in mind as he spoke. First, the moment when he spoke the pitiful cry. Mark records in his gospel that from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. The sixth hour would be noon, and the ninth hour 3 P.M., hence the time of so many Good Friday services. Several changes took place at noon and remained in effect until three. For one thing Jesus ceased talking. Up to that point he had spoken three words, to God in prayer, to his fellow-sufferer in answer to prayer, and to his mother by way of provision and statement of relationship. From that time forth he said nothing until the very end. Also, the multitudes apparently ceased their caustic remarks and demands for explanations which had they been given would not have been understood. Silence has a language all its own, and few things can enforce meaning like a pause at the right time. And especially is this true when in the normal course of events words are the customary thing. Added to this was the phenomena of darkness—and in the silence of the half night we have no difficulty imagining the awesome

feeling that prevailed as the multitude waited for what would happen next.

It is at this point that Jesus cries out, with a loud voice and not a muted whisper. And what a start that must have given those present, as he cried not to them but to God. After three hours of silence in which every indication could be observed that Jesus was slowly losing contact with life as we know it, suddenly he speaks again to show that he has not lost contact and that even the great separating barriers of pain and immediate death have not been able to isolate him completely from the human family who is the object of his divine mission. Pain and death have a way of separating us and placing us in utter loneliness; and each of us knows that in the moment of severe suffering it is no small consolation to know that others have suffered with equal severity and that we are not alone. And death, of course, is the ultimate in desolation, for here is one journey that we must take alone as far as holding human hands is concerned, and the Christian is the only one that has companionship and fellowship in that great hour. But Jesus cries out in this fourth word and breaks through the walls of separation; pain and death and rejection are all that men can do, and in that cry Jesus takes his place with humanity, to help and to save, for this is the will of God—and Jesus does this without regard to his own personal welfare. In other words, Jesus is willing to *lose* his life that others might find theirs.

Here then is the first sidelight furnished by the physical background of this fourth word. The bitter pangs of pain in its most diabolical form had not been able to cause Jesus to renounce his identification with and concern for humanity. There was no limit to which

he would not go to save men. This is what Paul must have had in mind there in Philippians when he said about Jesus "who became obedient unto death, *even the death of a cross.*"

Jesus then did not become embittered with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune—in fact, the pain and the prospect of death drew him closer to the purpose for which he had come—namely, the redemption of mankind; for as he shared our lot, he became more conscious of our burden and our temptation. And the proof of the fact that Jesus did not give in to despair is found in the fact that the fourth word from the cross is not the seventh word from the cross. If this were the dying breath of Jesus, we would have an even more difficult problem than we do—but it was not the last word. After this word he stated the completion of his mission in the sixth word—"It is finished," and then when he came to the very end, he taught us the approach we too can make to the great transition of death—"Father, into thy hands I commend my Spirit." This is not defeat but victory.

The second thing regarding the setting of this fourth word is what Jesus said. Or better still, what he quoted. Had this been the first time this phrase called the fourth word appeared in the Scriptures, it would be baffling indeed; but Jesus falls back on his Bible, our Old Testament. And as Charles Duell Kean has so well pointed out in his little book, *The Inward Cross*, (pp. 38-39).<sup>2</sup> Jesus uses here the General Confession of the Jewish Church, and while it is an admission of misery, it is an affirmation of faith. This twenty-second

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psalm is a Day of Atonement Psalm, when every pious Jew takes upon himself the responsibility for the suffering of Israel, and his own personal experience is identified with the destiny of his own people. Jesus then identifies himself, associates with, receives into fellowship, takes the part of, the sinner, even to the enduring the very thing that sin always accomplishes in human experience, namely, separation from God. And this law is so inevitable and inexorable that there is no exception even for the Son of God if he would be the Savior of man. In this taking of our part, Jesus accomplishes the desire of God—*hence*, there is purpose and meaning to his suffering—it is not an unrelated tragedy in history. Jesus never loses his touch with human need. And in this case he did not lose touch with Israel's ceremony of the sacrificial lamb on the Day of Atonement. To the Hebrews who witnessed the crucifixion, the quotation would have a specified context.

A third thing that may throw some light on the meaning of what Jesus said in this fourth word is to be found in the observation that one can be forsaken by another person but still identified with that person. For example, many a parent who loses all contact with his children as they go through this or that phase of growth knows what this is. There can be no communication, little contact, and practically no understanding—the father and the son, the mother and the daughter do not even live in the same world. But they are still identified! Sometimes in the marriage relationship, this can be seen. Can two people be any more closely associated in mind and heart than in the marriage relationship? And on the other hand, can two people be any further apart than some couples are; you wonder

what ever moved them to get married in the first place. But they are still identified one with the other. Jesus did something like this human affair when he voluntarily chose to take upon himself the form of a servant and be made in the "likeness of man." Therefore, strange as it may seem, Christ is cut off from God at the moment that he makes his most total contact with man. But on the other hand, his identity as the Son of God never changes—and that which bridges the gap at this point is *faith*—the faith of Jesus that God will keep his word, that there is a thing called redemption—that he will forgive these men whose part Jesus is taking—whose sin becomes his sin—whose death becomes his death. And just as God kept his promise to Israel and sent the long-hoped-for Messiah, so he will keep his promise to every man that if we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved. We have looked to Jesus as an example of morality and divinity as perfection and a host of other things—but Jesus is also the example of one who had an unshakable faith in the ultimate goodness of God, and this fourth word is a solid testimony to that conviction.

Now it seems to me that here is a shaft of light on this mysterious word that may throw some light into an otherwise dark corner. Jesus of course, understood the meaning of the atonement as no other ever has. And as he takes our place on Calvary he looks at this whole drama through the eyes of an intelligent understanding man as well as through the eyes of omniscient deity. At the moment when his identification with us is complete, the Son of Man speaks what would be the best response that man could make under the circumstances, and that utterance is *why, why*, would God do this? Not taken from the standpoint of why

would God do a thing like this to his Son, and is that not the crux of our difficulty with the word—we cannot conceive of God forsaking Jesus? *But why would God go to such lengths and suffering as this cross for a rebellious ungrateful creature like a human being?* It seems that as Jesus looks at this from the viewpoint of enlightened humanity, he is completely overcome with the grace and the goodness of God. We can see something of this in human relationships. Here is a wife who has a husband that is unbearable and a beast instead of being a considerate human being. The on-looker raises the question, why does she not cast him off and be done with her troubles? But the on-looker whose advice comes so freely has one missing element—*love*. And that makes all the difference in the world. It causes God to cry out in the eleventh chapter of Hosea, “How shall I give thee up, Israel . . .” It causes Jesus to say in John 3:16 “For God so loved the world . . .” and in that verse we hurry on to get to what man must do, the exercise of his faith, and in our haste we tread on the greatest fact of all the universe—*the love of God*.

We have thought long and written much as to the *how* of man’s salvation. And much ought to be thought at this point. What is God’s part, and what is man’s part—this is vitally important and has about it a mystery that we cannot explain fully. But I want to say that the *how* of our salvation is not nearly so mysterious to me as the *why* of our salvation. Why would a holy God want to have fellowship with a sinful man? As the penetrating gaze of deity looks down into the impure heart of humanity and sees there all the deceit, and double-dealing, and neglected virtue, and laziness and indifference, God does not approve of all this, yes, in



spite of us he *loves*. And I think Jesus catches something of that on Calvary's cross and cries out in utter desperation, *why would you do this for these awful people?* And the answer is the same as the wife or the husband, as the case may be, would reply to the inquiring neighbor, why do you put up with it? Because I love him. W. T. Conner has put this picture so well (*The Cross in the New Testament*, p. 165)<sup>3</sup> when he said, that God had two alternatives: one, to crush the sinner in penal justice—or two, to meet the situation with love and grace. He chose the second, not because he had to, or not because of anything outside of his own nature—but because of the kind of God that he was. Love is God's supreme quality.

So then, when you look at Calvary from this viewpoint, of Jesus becoming sin in our place, and completely identifying himself with those whom he came to save, we are like the hymn writer—"I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene, and wonder how he could love me a sinner condemned unclean." And so we reply, "how marvelous, how wonderful!" And rightly so. But the story does not end there—the last chapter has not been written—the final act of the drama is yet to take place—what will the husband do with the unfailing love of his wife—and what will the sinner do with a God who goes to Calvary in his behalf?

Here then is the *mystery of humanity*. And if we believe that the actions of God are hard to explain, so also are the actions of men. It is good news (gospel) beyond our ability to believe that God desires fellowship with us—this is unthinkable from the standpoint of

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human justice—but nevertheless the Bible tells us from Genesis to Revelation that this is God's desire. And one would think that as soon as this was told to thinking people their immediate reaction would be to praise the Lord, accept his invitation, admit their guilt and come to the simple terms that God has laid down that restoration of fellowship might take place—but alas, such is not the case. We reject his offer, we put off our decision, we hide behind every flimsy excuse imaginable, and life and death all the while hanging in the balance. Calvary was a deep cut into the heart of God, and the cross was the low point in man's ingratitude. But how much more it must grieve God to be rejected day by day, when the gospel has been preached, and Christ has been presented, and *still* people turn their back on the supreme gift of love. God has done all he will do to save you.

The fourth word from the cross in spite of all of its mystery is a word of great assurance; and even though we do not know all of what Jesus said at this point—yet we know *why* he said it. He was concerned about humanity. And never for a single moment did he forsake the people whom he came to save—his identification with people is complete and unshakable. He will never let us down—he will never forsake us in the hour of need or the hour of ease. The essential message that comes from this fourth word of Jesus is not to be found in explaining the mystery of the atonement, for in the final analysis this will not make us any more saved than we are—for whether we will admit it or not, we do not have the minds to comprehend the depth and the breadth of Calvary! It seems that as we view the death of Christ as a whole and especially the sentiment of this word of complete identification with a sinful people,

our reaction is, Lord, I do not know why you would want to forgive my sin, and I cannot begin to explain why you should go to such lengths to achieve forgiveness, but I am eternally grateful that you did. Scripture is its own best interpreter, and as I look at this fourth word and feel the force of that question *why?* I believe there is only one answer—*For God SO Loved*—that is why.

What are you doing, what have you already done with that love of God through Christ Jesus? When you realize with the full force of human intelligence that Christ took your place on Calvary—what then? There is only one reply—that of the disciple Thomas when he came to the same realization—

“My Lord and my God” (John 20:28).

## *The Fifth Word: Suffering*

*“After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst.”* JOHN 19:28

“After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished. . . saith, I thirst” (John 19:28). Of the seven words that Jesus uttered while on the cross perhaps the fifth admits of the simplest interpretation, for here is an experience that is common to every individual. From the little child in the hours of the night who rouses a reluctant parent to bring the proverbial glass of water to the nation's hero who lies on the field of

battle, the cry has come through the parched lips of humanity—"I thirst." Here is an experience of which we all know, and while Jesus may identify himself with mankind as a Savior from our sins, here is also identification in this fifth word from the cross as he takes part in the universal experience of human suffering.

The fifth word is unique in that it is the only word that Jesus spoke about his own needs—and this word does not come first as we might reasonably expect, but it comes at the end. If ever a person were justified in thinking of himself, it would be at this moment, and the usual cries that came from the crucified in the first century were pleas for mercy, or screaming complaints, or sharp cursings hurled in futile defiance toward those responsible for their unbearable ordeal—but not Jesus. At no time had his life ever been lived on the level of what he was *justified* in doing. Those who live on the levels of justice do not bear crosses, for here is a principle that is beyond justice.

And note also that this fifth word is prefaced by explanation in the text verse—"and Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished...saith I thirst." The agony had been endured through the long hours of crucifixion in part by his concern for others; he had been so absorbed in his work that until that was accomplished no other thought was allowed to intervene. This is not to say that absorption with purpose and mission reduces and renders unfeeling the sharp pains of the moments, but it gives a strength to endure heroically that can be found in no other place. A concern for another's welfare is always a healthy focus in life, and to be absorbed in purposeful living will get us over many a rough spot.

Now inasmuch as this fifth word is one in which

Jesus voices the agony of his ordeal, many have taken it as the invitation to dwell at length on the sufferings of Calvary, and with a little imagination this would not be at all difficult. In previous generations it was the common thing in the pre-Easter season for the pulpit to drive again every nail. But I think it is well to follow the pattern of the gospel writers and not dwell on the physical agony of the cross; for in the final analysis this was not the supreme suffering, and in the physical taken alone we shall not discover the deeper meaning of the cross.

In this cry of physical suffering Jesus is telling us something about *himself*, something about *humanity*, and something about *life*. We often ask the question, What would Jesus do? Let us then see what he did in this most difficult and demanding situation of Calvary.

The critics have been quick to attack Jesus at the very point of this word. Did Jesus not say to the woman at the well, "whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give to him shall never thirst"? How then could Jesus in his last hour cry out for water? The point is that Jesus did not give men physical water that would satisfy parched throats even to supplying his own need in this manner. He was talking about spiritual needs and that in the realms of the spirit he would satisfy eternally. And the very fact that he did cry out in thirst indicates that Jesus *belongs to the realms of the material and the physical!* This may seem a trivial point, but it bears directly upon an important consideration. For the most part, we have lingered long over the question of the divinity of Christ: was Christ God—was Christ divine? And this is a question that is vital today, in fact, the unifying thread of Protestant Christianity is found here—the recognition of the divinity of Christ. But the

other side of that picture is also a truth, and the fifth word from the cross is evidence at a significant moment in the life of Jesus. Was Christ man? Is there a thing called the *humanity of Jesus*? Oddly enough this was the great problem of the early Christians—those who lived at that time had no difficulty at all believing that Jesus was God. From what they had seen and what they had heard there was no doubt. Their difficulty was in recognizing that Jesus was human—that he was a man. In fact, the little book in our New Testament under the title of First John was written to establish the humanity of Jesus and as an answer to those who said that Christ did not have the limitations and aspects of human nature.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life... that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you (I John 1:1, 3)

What then does this fifth word tell us about Jesus? Two important things: First, that he *recognizes* the fact and the existence and the reality and the difficulty of trouble and suffering and physical limitations, and because of that fact, he stands in the position as no one else who has ever lived to be able to give comfort and to be able to utter the wonderful words of sympathy and consolation, I know because I have sat where you sit, I have been where you are, I have endured what you endure. Is it suffering? No one ever suffered like Jesus. Is it in being misunderstood? Who can compare with Jesus here? Is it in being the subject of unjust criticism? No one could find a single wrong thing that he

ever did, and yet the church and the state of his day agreed that he ought to die as a criminal. Is it being the victim of ingratitude? Who but Jesus knows the sharp point of this universal human failing?

The second thing is that his temptations were real and that his victory over sin was worth something. That as Jesus faced life as we know it, he had the same alternatives that we face, and "he was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin." As William James says, it was a real fight. Because Jesus really suffered, and was really tempted in the human capacity, he knows and he understands.

Young people in school know what it is to have a teacher who understands your weaknesses and who has in his make-up an element called "sympathy." I remember when I was in the seminary and used to recite for Dr. Davis, I thought at the time it had been so long since Dr. Davis learned his Greek he just could not conceive of anybody not knowing it. Jesus knows and understands, and this fifth word from the cross tells us that he has not only identified himself with humanity in being a Savior from sin, but he also takes our common bond of human suffering, and lest there be any doubt concerning the reality of the cross as a human experience, Jesus relieves that doubt with the cry "I thirst."

But this fifth word also tells us something about Jesus' view of his fellowman; namely, that as long as we hang on to this life we are going to be dependent upon the rest of humanity. Jesus voices here a personal need with the implication that those who surround the cross have the power to fill that need. In other words, Jesus is asking a favor. This in itself is not unusual, but that he would ask a favor of the men who had nailed



him to the cross is a bit unusual. This indicates that Jesus has not severed relationships with his enemies, and that the hatred and the cruelty is entirely on their side and not on his side—it is a one-sided quarrel. They were mad with him, but he was not mad with them. The pain and the injustice had not caused him to withdraw into a shell of bitterness and isolation to the place where he would do anything before asking a favor from the cruel people. This indicates also that Jesus had faith in humanity to the very last. There was something good even in pagan crucifiers and bigoted Pharisees that their hearts would be touched when they saw a fellow creature writhing in the agonies of thirst. In other words, even these men *were not all bad!*

In other words, although Jesus saw fully the awfulness of this crime, even to asking God to forgive them for it, yet he never allowed that to dim his enthusiasm for them as members of the human family and as people with the possibility of responding to the love of God. Jesus through his ministry and teachings and now in the extremity of the cross itself believed in the worth of human personality and he never lost his faith in man. There is the responsive cord if it can ever be found, there is a way that even the hardest can be touched, and when that way is discovered, there is an open door for the transforming power of God to work the supreme miracle of all, the changing of a human life.

We need to hasten on to say that Jesus had his faith in humanity rewarded. There was a soft spot in the hearts of at least one of these men for Jesus was given his drink. And you would never have thought that men who drove nails into a man's hand that they might exact the last ounce of suffering from his body would be the least bit concerned if he cried for water—*but*

*they were*—and Jesus knew it; they were not nearly so hard and cruel as they appeared. Add to this evidence also that one of the soldiers as he removed the body of Christ from the cross reached the conclusion—“Truly this man was the Son of God.” A man who was a member of the crucifixion detail of the palace guard saw the light!

The cross was an act of faith on the part of Jesus, and the fifth word from it is but a detailed example of what is true in the larger picture, that just as Jesus believes that these men would help a thirsty man and there was no logical reason to support that belief, so he had faith that his death on the cross would cause men to repent and accept God's gift. “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto myself.” What a rebuke to our hasty conclusion that mankind is no good, and it is no use to try to do anything with or for them.

Here is a word from the cross that teaches us to have faith in our fellowman. When all has been said and done, the answer to the question why do you believe in people can be found in the simple reply, “because Jesus believed in people.” And Jesus also teaches us in this fifth word that no person ever becomes doggedly independent to where he never needs a helping hand; for remember, the Son of God asked humanity for a cup of water that he himself was unable to supply. Paul was right—“no man lives unto himself,” and we must possess the humility to say to the one who can help us—“will you help me?” For it is in the process of helpfulness that we break down the separating barriers and establish the basis of communication, and by the very nature of one human being understanding the need of another human being there comes into existence a common bond.

There is another message that comes through this fifth word from the cross, and this is the most important of all; in this cry of physical suffering Jesus tells us something significant about life. In the cross as in no other place Jesus draws upon spiritual resources to meet physical needs, or as it might be phrased in other words, Jesus here had inner strength for outer struggles. Here is a case in point where the material is testing the spiritual. Most of us would like to be able to stand the test as did Jesus and emerge with wholesome attitudes and ultimate victory.

Now most people have resolved this matter of the material and the spiritual as being realities belonging to two distinct and separate realms. There is on the one hand the world of things and buildings and houses, and there is on the other hand the world of ideas and spirit. And like the east and the west we live under the illusion that either "never the twain shall meet," or even worse that they will meet only when we want them to come together, only when we desire to relate the world of things to the world of spirit. The man who regards religion as an escape from life lives here. The man who sees no relation between what he does and what he believes lives here.

All seems to go well and then the tragedy occurs, the crisis comes and whether we want to or not, whether we will admit it or not, what we think and what we do meet, what we believe and what we practice converge, and we discover what has been true all along, they were never separated in the first place. A crisis experience has a way of clearing the atmosphere and allowing us to see things as they are; and I think of the crisis and the tragedy not as a point where something new comes into being in the way of spiritual reserve,

but as a point where what is really there is revealed. Some labor under the illusion that in the hour of testing and crisis they will rise to meet the situation with great strength, when in reality they may discover in that moment that there is nothing to meet the situation with, the "cupboard will be bare." The crisis will merely open the door of the empty cupboard for all to see its destitution and in no sense will the crisis fill the empty shelves that the "poor dog might have his bone" to stay with our figure of speech.

The point is that man's physical problems and his spiritual needs are together all the time. For example if a family waits until they are making funeral arrangements to get a working philosophy of death, they will find it difficult to come by, and the now vacant chair in the household will only reveal how utterly unable they have been all the while to meet this inevitable experience in human life. It is the crisis that reveals the presence or the absence of faith, and suffering in all of its forms can strip back the veneer and allow us to see the thing for what it is.

The present crisis in the great social upheavals up and down the land today will not necessarily develop within us high standards of brotherhood. But we may very well be on the brink of discovering what it is that we really believe about this matter.

Life then has about it a *oneness* that few are willing to confess. We have so much more latitude of action (at least we think we do) if there is not always relationship between what we believe and what we do. But the Bible teaches us that our distinctions are false and our separations and divisions are not shared by God. Man is a creature and he is a spiritual creature. Sometimes we hear the question, do you believe that man

has a soul? And either way your reply is wrong because the question is wrong. Man does not *have* a soul—he *is* a soul. And this was settled back in the garden when “God formed man and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and *man became a living soul*” (Genesis 2:7).

Not long ago I heard Wayne Oates of the Southern Seminary in Louisville lecturing at George Washington University tell about living with his grandmother who reared him. She came down to breakfast one morning and Wayne said to her, “Grandma, how do you feel this morning?” “Well, son, it’s like this, you see I hurt worse all over more than I do in any one spot.”

Jesus then was not casting a sop to the wicked world of materialism and physical privation when he cried out in agony “I thirst.” He was still living in the same world of his Father’s Will, and his cry of pain is saying to all who suffer that faith in God’s power will lift us over this difficulty as well. The same faith then that caused our salvation to become a reality and gave us the victory over sin will so relate us to God and to his purposes that the problem of human suffering can also be conquered.

What then does this fifth word teach? The *oneness* of God, yes, and this lesson we have learned with reasonable success. More enlightened people are no longer trying to follow a part of Christianity and ignore another part, for in the end it will not do. We cannot follow the teachings of Jesus without following Jesus; we cannot accept Christ as Savior without accepting him as Lord. But the lesson on the *oneness* of life needs much more attention. Man does not have a body, mind and a soul—he *is all of these things and they are expressions of the same ultimate reality*. And even men of

medicine today are realizing that an outlook on life can be just as deadly as harmful bacteria. And the time to come into possession of this knowledge is not when the crisis is on—there will not be time—but when direction can be determined and attitudes adopted. Are you willing to begin that journey of faith so that when the time comes, and it will come, for you to cry out in agony “I thirst,” there will be the outlook on life, and the faith in God through Christ that will enable you to meet with victory the great inevitables of life. God is giving you time now to develop those resources. But as the old Chinese proverb says, the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step, and that first step is to take Christ as Savior.



## *The Sixth Word: Fulfillment*

*"It is finished . . ."* JOHN 19:30

Few men are able to say what Jesus announced in the sixth word from the cross, "It is finished." Some dangling end has yet to be tied up, some noble undertaking has been set aside for lack of time. The student in his classroom, the executive at his desk, the housewife in her home, the teacher in the school, the professional man in his practice, who can say that all has been accomplished which ought to be accomplished—"It is finished." But Jesus said this, and perhaps of the seven words from the cross the sixth is the most difficult to



believe. His prayers, his pardon, his principles, all these come natural from the lips of our Lord, but to hear the announcement of a completed task, this demands some explanation.

Oddly enough, this word from the cross was not the first time that Jesus referred to his ministry in such terms; in the gospels he speaks about his work as though he had every intention of finishing the task. In Samaria as he spoke to the woman at the well Jesus said this in John 4:34—"My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish my work." Again in the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17:4 Jesus said, "I have glorified thee on earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do."

Therefore, the natural question is raised in connection with the announcement of completion, how could Jesus say this when so much in connection with the Christian religion was obviously unfinished? The kingdom of God had not come in the hearts of men, the reformation of society was a dream yet to be realized, the ethics of the Sermon On the Mount lack much from becoming a part of the daily life of people, the power of sin looked amazingly secure in its hold over human life, and the great citadels of evil for the most part were unaware that Jesus had even lived not to mention accomplishing drastic changes in the scheme of things. And on the positive side of the ministry of Jesus and its natural results, the church had not yet come into being, the gospel had been preached to only a small group of people, and the dream of the prophets lacked much of fulfillment that "they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and nation shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn war any more," and the word of the

Lord did not cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

There is introduced in consideration of the sixth word from the cross one of the most vital questions ever asked concerning the coming of Christ; what was his purpose, why *did* he come to this earth, what was his real mission, and did he accomplish that? If such be the case, then he can say in truth from the cross—"It is finished." Now it may sound strange, but Jesus did not come to this earth to institute social reforms, or to eradicate the horrors of war, or to correct the evils of economic systems, or to soothe troubled nerves, or to patch up broken homes, or even to give humanity a superior ethic by which to live. In the course of his work and ministry he will do all of these things, but they are secondary results and not primary purposes. Let me put it this way: Jesus came that he might save sinners, or stating it even more accurately, *that sinners might be saved*—that conditions might be such that sinful man and a holy God can resume fellowship. Said the angel to Joseph in Matthew 1:21, "thou shalt call his name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sins." Paul in I Timothy 1:15 "Christ Jesus is come into the world to save sinners." And Jesus himself, in Luke 19:10 to Zacchaeus "the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Christ came then that a *relationship might be restored*—that your relationship to God and my relationship to God could be as it should, and this is beginning at the central problem of humanity. When this one is solved, we shall not have to worry about the social reforms, and the ethical relationships, and a thousand other evils of the day. On the other hand if this relationship with God is not right, we can live in a Utopia and still miss the main thing in life.

Now note that Jesus did not say here that the kingdom of God had come and that the Father's will was done on earth as it is in heaven; twenty centuries have trickled through the hour glass of time and there is much yet to be done in these areas. But there does not live a single human personality who will not be saved if he wants to be saved from sin; if you and I will ever get around to telling him that he is lost, and that he needs a Savior, and Jesus is that person, and that life will be infinitely better if he will become a Christian; but this is *our* work—not the work of Jesus. He has finished—we have only begun. And just as we are never to usurp the work of becoming the Savior of men, and this is the great temptation and pitfall of the church down through the ages, so Jesus will never usurp the work of proclaiming the gospel—for this is the privilege of humanity.

The word that seems best to describe the sixth saying of Jesus is the word "fulfillment," and some examples will be helpful in determining what it was that Jesus fulfilled or finished. Perhaps the best illustration is found in the words of Jesus when he said, "I have come not to destroy but to fulfill the law and the prophets." We often think of Jesus as being apart from and superior to the law of the Old Testament and we do err greatly at this point, for the Bible plainly teaches that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law, and that without him the law is incomplete. Take the Ten Commandments as a case in point, and they form the best illustration of the moral law of God in understandable terms. Suppose God had ceased his dealings with humanity at this point, and I have heard people say in sincerity that all this nation needs is to follow the Ten Commandment-golden-rule morality.

If God had stopped at that point everyone of us would have been doomed. If the voice of God was no longer heard when the smoke and thunder cleared from Sinai's summit, then the only thing we would have had is that which is the great revealer of evil and wrong doing, for this is the function of law, and by itself, it will break us every time. Take that one commandment from the decalogue, "Thou shalt not bear false witness," who can claim exemption from the accusing finger of this one law? Who tells the truth and nothing but the truth? To be sure the more we study the Ten Commandments the more we appreciate their authority and their right as grounded in their author, God himself, but we shall do with these laws what humanity has done in all the ages, and cry unto God in pitiful sincerity, O Lord, I know it says in your law "Thou shalt not bear false witness," but what if I do?—What if I already have?—What then?

The law then is incomplete in meeting the needs of sinful man; no wonder Jesus said, I have come to fulfill and finish the law, and when his blood had been shed on the cross, it could be said for the first time—"It is finished,"—it is fulfilled. Christ Jesus is the only one who can answer the question of the man who wants to know what to do when he has made his mistake and violated the moral law of the universe. Without Christ he is hopeless and broken. But with Christ something can be done, for in this cross upon which our Lord is dying, there is forgiveness and pardon for the one caught in the clutches of the law. The moral law may be primary, but it is not final; Sinai had the first word but Calvary had the last word.

Therefore, it is Jesus who gives law its real function as a teacher and a revealer of sin. We desperately need

that moral law if we are to walk worthily of our Lord, but for the violator there is hope, and this, of course, is the eternal good news that Jesus came to preach. This truth needs to be underscored especially in our generation. The great revival of religion through which we are now passing may well rise or fall at this point. If we try to make Christ the substitution and cancellation of the moral law, we shall not only make a tremendous mistake, but we shall go against the express purpose of our Lord; said Jesus, the law still goes, the Ten Commandments are still in effect. The law of God is finished in the forgiveness of Christ. Therefore, we do not stand before God as a judge; but we stand before God as a Father.

Another example of what was finished or fulfilled by Jesus in this sixth word can be found as we see that here in Calvary the nature of God can now be known fully. Let me put it this way: that the *supreme* aspect of God's nature can be known and understood. And this will answer one of the greatest questions that will ever come into the mind of man. Is God for me or is he against me? Is he on my side, or is he out to get me, so to speak? Does God love me or is he indifferent to my needs and desires and problems? The answer to this question makes a real difference in a person's life. How bitter we can become in all of our dealings when we believe that things are stacked against us; and on the other hand how good we can become at least in our human relations when we realize that God is our friend. Paul states this in his classic question in the Roman letter, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" And that verse means, that if God is for us, and he is for us, then who can be against us?

Do you ever reach the point where you ask the

question, does God care? Does God understand? There are times when it seems that our fellow human beings just do not seem to understand, when we just are unable to communicate our feelings and actions as they really are. And while we may be utterly lonely of human fellowship, as long as we shall look up into the face of God through our faith in Christ Jesus, we shall never be cast off from divine companionship. The cross then is the *final* word from God to humanity about the nature of God. And that word is one of love and mercy and grace—the final word is not justice and anger.

Can you look at Calvary and ever doubt the love of God? The resurrection will vindicate its truth and the Holy Spirit will give it power to cover the earth; but the fact which is set up as truth and is spread abroad that all might know and believe is the love of God through the death of Christ. God as the creator is not the last word. God as the law-giver is not the last word. God as prophet and priest is not the last word. God as a Redeemer—*this is the last word*. Only as Christ redeems will he say "*It is finished.*" And what is true on the scale of humanity as a whole is true also on the individual level; can Jesus say to you as a person, "It is finished?" He can say that only if you have been redeemed; a reformed character is not enough—church membership is not enough. The finished work of Christ is always *redemption*.

There is at least one more thing in this sixth word: not only is Christ saying that the law is at last fulfilled, and the picture of what God is like is finished, he also is saying that the *plan* whereby a man might be saved is *finished!* Now on the surface that may not seem to bear at all on the people living in the present; but if we think more carefully the implication is serious and

crucial. Jesus is saying here that the redemptive work of God is now complete—"the seed of the woman has bruised the head of the serpent." And if God has done all he will do to redeem an erring humanity, then he has done all he will do. This does not mean that God no longer speaks or works in his creation or with his creatures; this does not mean that he has spoken and now is silent for the rest of eternity and that his will cannot be learned and that prayer is no longer useful. God has spoken many times since the day of the cross, and through the witness and ministry of the Holy Spirit he lives and moves within the hearts of men to convict of sin and to move to a voluntary response in accepting Christ as Savior. All this he does, but as far as adding anything to the plan of salvation, or providing another way by which sin might be forgiven, such is not the case—for that "is finished."

*Therefore*, God comes to man today through the agency of his Holy Spirit and puts the proposition squarely up to the individual and in essence makes this proclamation. God has provided a way whereby you can be forgiven; no other way will be provided; no other plan of redemption is going to be offered. It is on the basis of Calvary's cross that decision must be made, the issue of Christ, nothing more and nothing less. What are you going to do with him, now that it is finished, and why do you wait so long to make your decision?

There is a very real sense in which God forfeits his initiative in order that he might save the sinner; and this initiative, the upper hand so to speak, he has maintained all down the line. As Creator, as lawgiver, as priest, as prophet, even as King, God's power and initiative is carefully maintained. But as God becomes

Redeemer and Savior, he is willing to give up his ascendancy that he might lift fallen humanity. As Paul would put it, "he emptied himself and *became obedient.*"

We see this in human relationships in many areas. For example, here is a young man who is going to ask a young lady for a date. And according to the social custom prevailing in the better circles of society the man has the initiative, the ascendancy in these matters. But if he would be successful he must be willing to give up this initiative, for the very moment that he picks up the telephone and says, "May I come over and see you this evening?" he runs the risk of refusal, and the upper hand then goes to the young lady. For now that he has phoned and asked, there is present the alternatives of acceptance or refusal, and they were not present before the young man exercised his prerogative of invitation.

A Baptist church does the same thing when it decides to call a pastor. When dickerings have reached a sufficient stage of advancement, the pulpit committee usually says something like this to the candidate—"Now if we call you will you accept?" To which I would always reply, "You will have to call me and see." In other words, you will have to run the risk of refusal and acceptance, because I too am taking that risk.

Now I realize that analogies are poor teachers, and the two I have given will break down at many points, but that is beside the point. For the essential comparison is true; namely, that God in Christ has given up a part of his initiative and run the risk of refusal; we can either accept him or reject him, and God does not want anyone to reject his Son. But God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, and in the



giving of his Son, some may reject, but some will be saved if they will only have faith. This is how much God loves humanity.

The sixth word from the cross then becomes the most crucial word that he spoke while he died. Other of these seven words contain more comfort or more mystery or more depth, but this sixth word is the one that shifts the burden of responsibility from God to man; for up until this redemptive act on Calvary, humanity could resort to the plea of ignorance or else weakness before a law that was difficult to observe. But now that relationship has been made simple as well as possible for every individual, for "whatsoever" includes anyone. To borrow the words of Paul as found in Romans 2:1, "Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man." This word then is unthinkably serious, for man now has the exalted position of determining his own destiny. What is Christ going to do with you on the great day of judgment? That question is not hard to answer—he will do with you exactly what you have done with him. "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32, 33).

If we spurn his invitation to salvation, disregard his code of ethics, ignore his church, then we leave him no choice but to say, "Depart from me for I never knew you." On the other hand if we accept him as our Savior, and serve him to the best of our ability faithfully in society and in the church, Jesus will say, "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

## *The Seventh Word: Triumph*

*“And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.”* LUKE 23:46

Few things can be stated with absolute certainty in this life, but one of the inevitables of human experience is the fact of death. As Jesus identifies himself with humanity and assumes the limitations of human flesh, he, too, must face this unavoidable conclusion to life. The seven words from the cross have given rich insight into the mind of the Master in this crucial experience,

and the seventh word especially, for it is the last thing that Jesus said before he died, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." These are not the words of one who confronts inexplicable mystery and begins a venture into the great unknown, but rather these are the sentiments of calm confidence and victorious faith given by one who is assured that the author of life is also the author of death and that its function is not only real but necessary.

It is well to observe here that this is not the first time that Jesus faced the fact that he would die. In his conversations with the disciples reference had been so directed on numerous occasions. To the amazement of Simon Peter, especially, Jesus had predicted with accuracy the events of Calvary, and the gospels record that he voluntarily set his face toward Jerusalem knowing full well the consequences of going to that beloved city again. One cannot help but notice here the sharp contrast that Jesus presents to the prevailing view of death held by most people. It is a subject about which we do not speak, and even when confronted with its stark reality, every effort is made to cover up its presence as if by pretense we could change the facts. Little wonder that we are thrown headlong into this great universal crisis of living not only with understandably small warning but with almost inexcusable lack of preparation. Some, like one of the French kings of history, do not want the subject of death ever mentioned in their presence; or perhaps a funeral service is never attended and the obituary columns are never read, as if by closing the eye to reality, it could somehow be changed. One of the things about Jesus that appeals to me most is his realistic approach to life and that he did not solve the problems of living by pretense or evasion.

It is well also to observe that Jesus faces the whole subject of death not as the dismal defeat into black oblivion; but as the key to victory, as the entry into life, as just one more illustration of the consistency of God and the ministry of faith. Jesus gives us in the cross his view of death which is not the great inconsistency in the picture of life, the piece in the puzzle which we have left over and will fit nowhere, but which is the one key that unlocks the meaning of life. When the seventh word from the cross can become the theme-song of life, we have won a triumphant victory. For this thing of voluntary death runs the whole gamut of Christianity and successful living.

A marriage will not succeed without it; two supreme wills cannot exist in this tight relationship, but only as one is willing to give and to sacrifice his desires and ambitions for the common good can he be fit to live with. And no one knows better than ministers what the tragic absence of self-sacrifice can mean in the marriage relationship. Parents cannot fulfill their God-given function without foregoing much that they would like to do in the interests of their children. And how disappointing it is when a father will sacrifice the development of his children in the interests of his career or a mother will refuse to let go of the great social whirl that she might be a mother to young life. So often one thing within us must die that another might live for there is not time nor room for both to exist.

The principle of death then fits into every major decision of life, and the reason that we find our physical death so difficult to face is because we are on totally new ground; but Christ would have us on familiar ground at this point, providing we have taken up our cross as Christians and followed him. The great symbols

of our faith are all symbols of death and resurrection; the resurrection we have magnified, but the death we have minimized. The symbol of the cross, the symbol of baptism, the symbol of the Lord's Supper—all have this common element.

Therefore, let us examine this seventh word from the cross in the light of the one who said it. For this word is more deeply personal than any that Jesus uttered. The fifth word, "I thirst" was personal, but it was temporary, for Jesus would shortly be beyond the realm of physical thirst, but the seventh word, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit," here is the innermost sanctum of a man's life. Look at it first from the standpoint that here, Jesus is *dying in the same manner that he lived*: in other words, how we live and how we die have a marked relationship to each other.

Note that the seventh word is a quotation from the Scripture, Psalm 31:5. When a man has lived with his Bible, the Bible will speak with unusual pertinency in the hour of crisis. On the other hand, when one has ignored the Bible for a life time, he may find it to be a closed book when the hour of emergency arises. Jesus knew where to go in this book, because he had been there before. These verses were like old friends; and when one is dying it is the old friend that one wants to see. Psalm 31 was the psalm used on the day of the Feast of Dedication, a feast in remembrance of the cleansing of the Temple from pagan pollution in former centuries. The pious Jew would remember those who chose to die rather than compromise their faith. How fitting that Jesus should quote here at the hour of his supreme sacrifice.

The seventh word was a prayer, offered by one who stood on familiar ground as he prayed. Most individuals

will pray when the going is rough, but to pray with understanding and dedication we must pray as one who has prayed before. Jesus found his strength as he prayed; and how often is it tragically true that the weak link in our spiritual chain is prayer. We can worship, we can teach, we can organize, but we have not learned to pray.

Jesus then, was victorious here, he was spiritual here, he had faith here, because this was his life, and just as his coat was without seam for which the soldiers cast lots, so his life was woven with a single strand. A crisis in one's life, and certainly death is one of the greatest, does not create fortitude and faith; it only strips back the veneer and allows one to observe what is really there. Had not Jesus said that no man can serve two masters? That one cannot go in different directions at the same time? Our living and our dying bear marked relation. Charles Lamb remarked on one occasion concerning a friend "he parted this life on last Wednesday evening, dying as he had lived without much trouble." Clovis Chappel, tells the story (*The Seven Words*, p. 70)<sup>4</sup> concerning the saintly father of Dr. Edwin McNeil Poteat. The elder Dr. Poteat was also a minister and when he realized his time had come he sent for his son. Said the father to the son, "I want you to conduct my funeral. I realize that I am asking you to do a rather difficult thing." And then he went on to say, with a twinkle in his eye that was so characteristic of the way he had lived through the years, "but if you will do this for me, I promise never to ask you to do it again." Some would say that this was no time for levity, but on the other hand, here was a

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man who went to stand before his Lord not in despair and mystery, but in confidence and assurance, because this is the way he lived through the years.

Jesus also says in this seventh word of triumph that the *essential reality is spiritual*. And consequently the essential victory in life is a spiritual victory, and the most humiliating defeat in life is a spiritual defeat. We shall win or lose right at this point, and the reasons are obvious if we stop and think about it: God is a spirit—this we have been willing to admit readily. Man is a spirit—this we admit only to a degree. Man's problem is spiritual—so many do not see this at all. And we seek all sorts of things on which to place the blame when all along we are the problem. Shakespeare put it well in the mouth of Cassius, "The fault dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves" (*Julius Caesar*, Act I, Sc 2, Line 139).

It was about his spirit that Jesus expressed concern and voiced feelings. How pathetic it is when men can stand in the very shadow of death and devote their time, small though it may be, to arranging for trivia that in the end will amount to nothing. The disposition of property, the arrangements of a ceremony, the alleviation of passing pain—all this certainly has its place, and Jesus arranged for his mother and sought to quench his thirst, but not to the exclusion of the main issue. His last was a word for the spiritual and the final pronouncement that his relationship with his Father was proper and wholesome.

Now this was not unusual for Jesus to say, and no one is surprised to hear this seventh word voiced in the framework of spiritual truth. Had Jesus not taught his entire ministry in this vein? Did he not say in the Sermon On the Mount—"Seek ye first the kingdom of

God and his righteousness." "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth . . . but treasures in heaven"? What then is so unusual about this word as to merit special attention regarding its spiritual message? The point that I make here is that Jesus now practices what he had been preaching; he gives evidence that his beliefs were deep and genuine. To say that the spiritual is the uppermost part of life and to *live* and *behave* as though this were true can be quite different. But when one dies on a cross, or even when one stands at the very door of death, he is likely to revert to his true nature and give expression to the real imprint of his life. Jesus had said that the spiritual side of man is to *come first*; and when the testing time came Jesus *put it first!* I know of few questions that will reveal the position of a man, or a church, or a nation than to answer truthfully *what comes first?* If I can only have one thing what will it be? The first quest of life is the real revealer of the soul. You cannot take a first-rate religion and give it second place in life and expect to find the answer and maintain the zest; for religion will become stale and dull and boring.

Several weeks ago I heard Gerald Kennedy, as he spoke in our city, make an observation which I believe to be true. Said the bishop, when the Russians launched their satellite first, much to our consternation they not only revealed the fact that for the moment at least they were ahead of the United States in the conquest of space, but it also revealed something significant about what we as a nation think is really important. The hue and cry up and down the land would have found no parallel in the 46th psalm:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we



fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; . . . The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Do we believe the words of this psalm? Of course we do, but in a day when the material things loom so large it is so easy to say and even easier to believe that

Science is our strength, and the gods of physics are our refuge.

But whether we admit it or not, God is still the eternal refuge, and the spiritual is still the essential reality, and the psalmist writing again was also right:

He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh:  
the Lord shall have them in derision (Psalm 2:4).

Jesus also tells us in this seventh word that his faith is in a *person* and not a principle, or a philosophy, or a primeval force, or a system, or an institution. Jesus then believed that God was his heavenly Father with a personal interest and concern. Now right at this point is where the pulpit needs to sound some words of *warning* as well as some words of *encouragement*. The warning is to the individual who believes in God as the creator of the world, and because he believes that, he labors under the illusion that everything is all right and that he has done his bit religiously. There is a vast difference between this kind of faith in God and the faith that Jesus demonstrates in the seventh word from the cross. To believe in a supreme being, an architect of the universe is not only easy but natural. As a matter of fact, the implications of unbelief are far more difficult to explain than the implications of belief; the position of the atheist and agnostic have more unan-

swered questions than that of the most devout devotee of Christianity. But pathetically enough, so many sincerely think that once you acknowledge the fact that there is a God—all is well. We must bear in mind that the Pharisee in the day of Jesus was far more religious, pious and moral than many Christians of today. And that if the Ten Commandments had been sufficient, Jesus would not have come; if the Sermon On the Mount had been adequate spiritually for life, then the cross need not have taken place; and that if Isaiah and Micah and Jeremiah gave the complete picture of God, then Jesus need not have come.

So then the warning that must be sounded in our day is that believing in the existence of God as creator and supreme power does not make you a Christian. One becomes a Christian only as he accepts Christ as personal Savior—and anything short of that step will cause us to miss the mark. When the question is put, do you believe in God? The answer should come back, I believe in the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and who was revealed and made known in the man of Galilee. This is a far cry from the god of science and philosophy who sees not nor intervenes in the affairs of his creatures. The seventh word from the cross gives encouragement that God is more than the first cause of all things, he is a person with whom we can talk, who sees our lives, who knows our needs, who has told us what we ought to do, and then who observes our obedience or our disobedience.

Now the question is not difficult to predict, and it is highly personal and decisively important. *Can you call God Father?* And do not confuse this with being able to call God *creator*—or even *redeemer*. For you can recognize his creative powers, and confess readily his

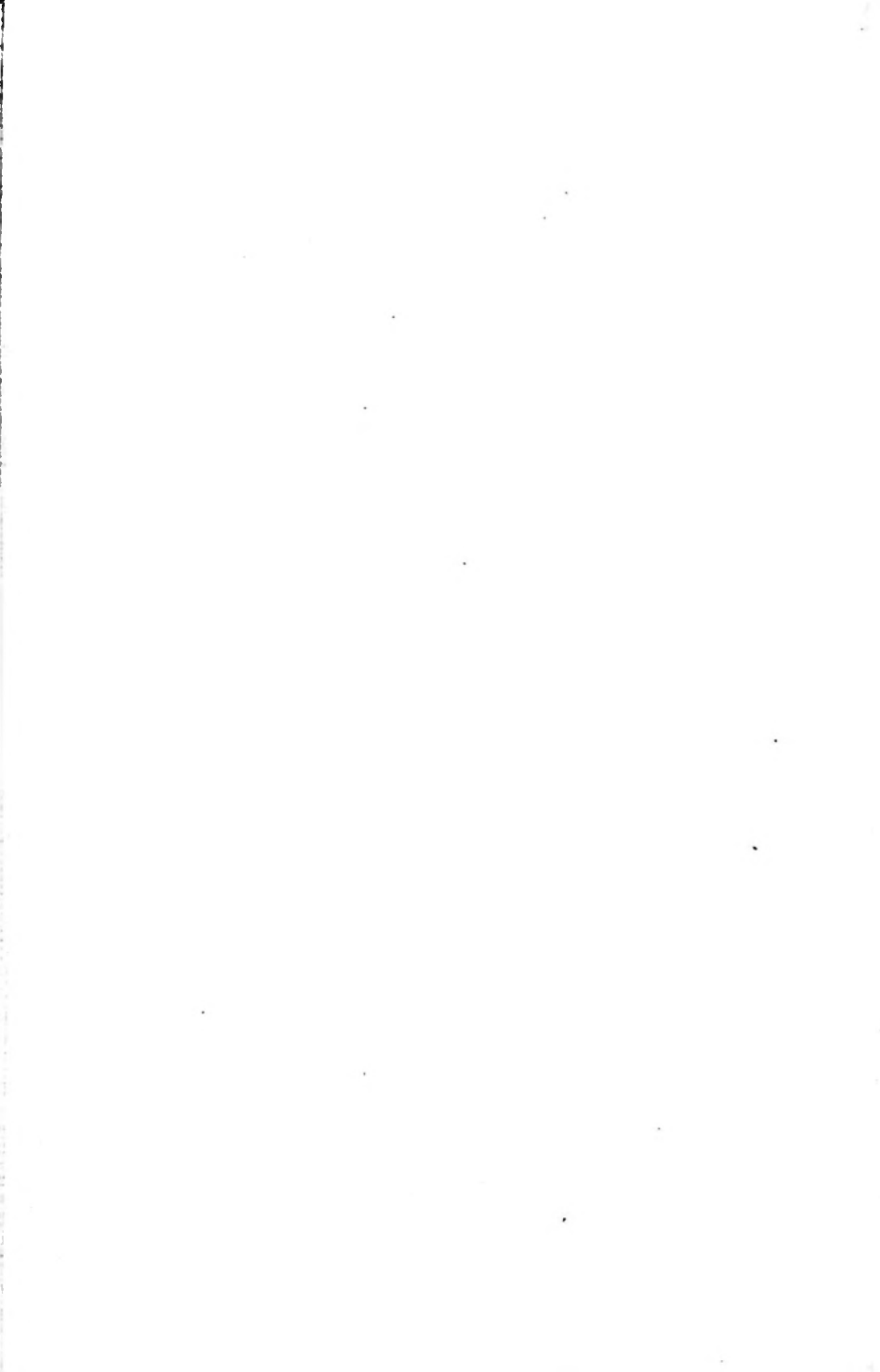
redemptive work in Christ, and still God is not *your* Father. For Father indicates personal relationship—it indicates sonship—it indicates connection by birth. And the Bible is crystal clear at this point, and the doom of man as well as the victory of man is spelled out in plain language. Who is a son of God? Let Paul answer in Romans 8:14 “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, *they* are the sons of God.” How does one come into the family of God’s children? “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). By whom does this sonship take place? “Jesus saith, I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). This is pretty clear; God becomes our spiritual Father as Christ becomes our Savior from sin. Is Christ your Savior? Have you confessed him before men as he commanded and followed him in baptism?

The seventh word from the cross is unique for us in that this is the only word that Jesus spoke that we can say completely with him. The rest are *his* words and shall ever remain so, but this seventh word is in a real sense *our* word. We can share in the first word, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” The second word, “This day shalt thou be with me in paradise,” deals in a realm where we cannot go. The third word, “Woman, behold thy son,” “son, behold thy mother,” established relationships by which we live spiritually—we would never have done this on our own. The fourth word states that which we cannot participate in, that of becoming sin for humanity, “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” The fifth word expresses physical pain that we shall never equal when Jesus said, “I thirst.” And the sixth word announces the completion of the plan of redemption shifting the initiative from

God to man for our response. But the seventh word, this one we can say, and mean, for God can become our Father and into his hands we can trust our spirit.







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