

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, March 13, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MATTHEW 27:46 & PSALM 22:1

“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’ — which means, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’”

“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me...”

THE FOURTH WORD FROM THE CROSS
The Word of Desolation

It is 12 o’clock, on Friday, the day of the Passover Feast in the year A.D. 29. Josephus, the celebrated Jewish historian, estimated that there were in Jerusalem for that Passover some two and a half million people. The streets were thronged, the Temple area crammed with a writhing mass of humanity intent on performing their religious obligations. Women throughout the city are performing their household duties in the home.

But suddenly a startling thing occurs — a weird, unearthly change begins to take place. It is a bright eastern noonday, but now, over the old city, there is stealing, slowly but relentlessly, a thick, impenetrable curtain of darkness, like the curtain of a moonless night. Men gasp and find that they can hardly grope their way through the streets. Work comes to a virtual standstill; every eye is fastened upon the darkened city; but there is nothing to see except that thick pall of midnight stretched out across the heavens.

And the meaning of this uncanny phenomenon? Just this — on yonder hill, outside the city gate, the God-Man, nailed to a cross, is writhing in His death agony. And while the sadistic mob, jostling each other on the slopes of Calvary, mock the suffering Lord of glory, and while the religious leaders taunt Him and jeer at Him, nature hides her face in shame!

“Well might the sun in darkness hide,
And shut his glories in
When Christ, the mighty Maker, died
For man the creature’s sin.”

Fittingly enough, as when an eclipse of the sun occurs, the darkness was accompanied by a weird silence, which caused even the birds to cease their song.

But abruptly, the dread silence is broken, and a cry, which, for mystery and awfulness, has never been equaled, rings out from the middle Cross on Calvary, as the Son of God lifts His eyes to the darkened heavens, and in His own native Aramaic tongue, pours out His stricken soul to God, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?”

This broken-hearted cry of our dying Lord is almost too sacred a thing to discuss and

analyze. We could never fully understand the meaning of the cry or the desolation of His soul as He uttered it. To fully understand the words would involve comprehensive understanding of the secret counsels of God.

Martin Luther was contemplating this saying on one occasion. His mind was so captivated and intrigued by this utterance that he refrained from food and sleep in order to meditate upon its meaning. Finally, rising from his desk, he mumbled to himself, “God, forsaken by God! How can it be? Who can understand it?”

This is the fourth word that Jesus uttered from the Cross. It stands at the center of the seven, and it seems to me altogether fitting that it should be so; for here the tragedy of the crucifixion reaches its climax.

This was undoubtedly the most terrible moment in the whole earthy life of our Lord. The darkness which covered the face of the earth was as nothing compared with that awful darkness which overwhelmed the soul of our Savior.

Jesus had always lived in the sunshine of God’s love. Of course, from the human standpoint, His life was hard and rough. He had few of the cherished comforts of life. Born into a poor home, He toiled from an early age at the carpenter’s bench, earning His bread by the sweat of His brow. During His public ministry, poverty continued to cling to Him. He had nowhere to lay His head. He was dependent upon the generosity of friends for His support. And besides all this, He was a lonely Man because He was misunderstood: misunderstood by the people at large, by the religious leaders, by His disciples, by His family, and even by His mother! And yet to say that His was an unhappy life would be to give an entirely false impression. He was not primarily “the Man of Sorrows”; He was supremely “the Man of Joy.” What He talked about was His joy; and it was this joy of His which He wished to leave with His disciples as His finest bequest. He completely triumphed over outward circumstances.

But notice carefully, the secret and the source of our Lord’s deep and abiding joy was His consciousness of His Heavenly Father’s presence with Him. Between Jesus and His father there had always existed a constant and unbroken fellowship. No matter how harrowing life may have been for Him, He could always hear ringing in His ears the Father’s words:

“This is My Son, Whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.”

(Matt. 3:17)

But now on the Cross, at this last terrible hour, He felt that even His Father’s face was hidden from Him; His Father’s presence removed. And this loneliness was hard to bear, not only because Jesus was so spiritually sensitive, but because this was in such sharp contrast to all that He had known before. It was so appallingly new in His experience!

A man who goes out into the night from a brilliantly lighted room finds the darkness much more intense than if he went from a room that was but dimly lighted. In like manner, our Lord missed the Presence of God so much just because He had been so deeply conscious of that Presence through the years.

“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Did you ever notice that this was the only occasion when He addressed His Father as “God”? Always before it had been “My Father.”

There have been many attempts to penetrate behind the mystery of this saying, and we shall examine a few of them briefly.

1. It has been said that Jesus was repeating to Himself Psalm 22. It is a strange and wonderful thing how Psalm 22 runs through the whole crucifixion narrative; and this cry is actually the first verse of that psalm. As the Psalmist proceeds, he says, “I am scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see Me mock Me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads saying, ‘He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue Him. Let Him deliver Him since He delights in Him.’” A few verses further on we read, “They divide My garments among them and cast lots for My clothing.”

Now it has been suggested that Jesus on the Cross was actually repeating that Psalm to Himself; and though Psalm 22 begins in complete dejection, it ends in soaring triumph — “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before Him...” (verse 27) Jesus, it is said, was repeating that Psalm on the Cross as a picture of His own situation, and as a song of His trust and confidence in God.

This is an attractive suggestion except for the crucial fact that a man writhing in agony upon a cross does not recite poetry to himself, even the poetry of a psalm. And besides that, the whole atmosphere of the darkened world is the atmosphere of unrelieved tragedy.

2. The suggestion has been made that Jesus uttered these words because He was afraid to die but such an explanation of the cry is patently untrue. Jesus was not afraid to die. He did not court death, but when He saw that no other course was open to Him, he courageously accepted what lay in store for Him. As a matter of historical fact, the victims of this cruel punishment longed and cried and prayed for death. Death to them was not a foe but a friend, bringing them happy release from intolerable agony.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus had a brief glimpse over the precipice into the hell that would face Him on the Cross. Humanly He recoiled and pleaded, “Father, isn’t there any other way?” He knew beforehand the cup of wrath which He must drink, and how bitter it would be. But knowing that the Cross was God’s will and God’s way, He pursued that way with indomitable faith and courage, so dearly did He love us!

And let us remember that Christ has given courage and faith to countless martyrs as they have faced death for His sake. I think of the young Covenanter who rose on the morning of his execution and looking through the barred window of his cell in the Tolbooth Prison in Edinburgh, was heard to exclaim, “This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” (Psalm 118:24)

And during that awful killing time in Scotland, on the afternoon of May 11, 1685, Margaret Mclauchlan, aged 69, and Margaret Wilson, aged 18, were tied to stakes in the Solway

Firth as the tide came in. They would not renounce their faith, and until the moment when the water reached their lips, they were still singing psalms of praise to God.

And if a Christian can die so gallantly, how could the Master have feared death? — For “the servant is not greater than his Lord.” (John 13:16)

3. Others have believed that this cry was wrung from our Savior’s soul because He was being punished by God.

Now we must never forget that Jesus on Calvary bore the awful punishment for your sin and mine. He accepted that punishment as the price that had to be paid for our redemption: But that is very different from saying that God punished Him. A father does not punish his son for obeying him, and on the Cross Christ perfectly obeyed the Father’s will by finishing the work God gave Him to do. Never was He more “the beloved Son” than when He hung and suffered and died on Calvary. He said Himself, “The reason My Father loves Me is that I lay down My life...” (John 10:17)

4. Still others have said that here we see Jesus plumbing the uttermost depths of human desolation. It is said, and rightly so, that Jesus could not be a perfect and compassionate Savior unless he had experienced the very ultimate in human pathos and frustration. Now, in human experience as life goes on, and as bitter tragedy enters into it, there comes times, perhaps only one time in life, when we feel that God has forgotten and forsaken us; when we are immersed in a situation beyond our understanding; and when we feel bereft even of God.

That, it is said, is what happened to Jesus on the Cross. This explanation leads us part of the way, but it does not take us far enough.

Can we, then, reverently, and in some measure, understand the meaning of this agonizing cry of our Lord? I think we can; and it seems to me that the clue to its meaning lies in the fact that:

5. In that moment the weight of the world’s sin fell upon the sinless heart and soul of Jesus.

St. Paul, in a sentence of amazing spiritual insight, exclaims, “For God caused Christ, Who Himself was sinless, actually to be sin for our sakes, so that in Christ we might be made good with the goodness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:21) Or as the Living Bible renders it, “For God took the sinless Christ and poured into Him our sins. Then, in exchange, He poured God’s goodness into us!”

Without the belief that Jesus “bore our sins in His own body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24), the cry from the Cross cannot be explained. But because Jesus was “the Lamb of God Who bore away the sins of the world” (John 1:29); and because “on Him was laid the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6); we have the key to this divinely mysterious cry.

Sin always separates a person from God. The sinner feels like Cain, “cast out from the

presence of the Lord.” (Genesis 4:16) On the Cross, Jesus was the Beloved Son of His Father, and yet, because he was willingly and vicariously bearing the crushing weight of the world’s sin, God had to hide His face from Him; for God cannot look upon sin.

The penalty Jesus bore for us was the punishment which our sin deserved, and part of that penalty was the inevitable separation from God which sin inevitably brings; and it was because of that separation from His Father that in an agony of soul He cried,

“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

This was the unspeakable spiritual agony of the Savior. Here was the crucifixion within the crucifixion. It was at that precise moment that “God made His soul an offering for sin.” (Isaiah 53:10)

“But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed.
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through
Ere He found His sheep that was lost.”

I do not know how to fathom, by any theory of atonement, what it was that happened at Calvary. I only know that it was through those deep waters and that dark night that the Shepherd found His sheep. And I only know that when they thrust our Lord outside the city gate to die, they put the key of the whole wide world into His pierced Hand forever.

What should the sight of the dying Lord, and the sound of His heart-rending cry, do for us this morning? Surely it is the one thing that makes me feel my need of forgiveness.

O. Henry, in one of his moving short stories, tells of a lad who was brought up in a village. In school he used to sit beside a girl, and they were fond of each other. He went, in time, to the city, where he fell on evil ways. He became a pickpocket and a petty thief. One day he had just snatched an old lady’s wallet. It was clever work, and he was pleased with himself. Then he saw coming down the street the girl whom he used to know, still sweet with the radiance of innocence. And suddenly he saw himself for the cheap, vile thing he was! Burning with shame, he leaned his head against the cool iron of a lamp post,

“Oh God,” he cried, “I wish I could die!”

Faced with the vision of purity, He saw himself as he really was. And,

“When to the Cross I turn my eyes,
And gaze on Calvary...”

I see not only ineffable purity — I see also suffering love — and seeing Jesus on His Cross, I realize that I helped to put Him there: Thus, I see myself in all my sin and need of pardon. And looking on the heart of God laid bare in redeeming love, I can only exclaim,

“Oh, dearly, dearly has He loved, And I must love Him too; And trust in His redeeming blood; And try His works to do.”

AMEN.