

S.N. Jan. 3, 1971 A.M

THE FOURTH WORD FROM THE CROSS

Matthew 27:46

INTRODUCTION

The first word was, "Father, forgive them."

The second word was spoken to the thief, a word of mercy.

The third word was a word of affection spoken to his mother.

Now the fourth word is a word of desertion.

The scene has changed at the cross and the Bible tells us it is the ninth hour, that (darkness) began at noon, the sixth hour, and lasted until the ninth hour. The dense darkness for three hours was not an eclipse of the sun; this was (nature) showing its sympathy with the tragedy of the dying Son of God.

These two or three hours somehow hid from the eyes of those who were looking on, those who had mocked him, and a strange fear and awe came over them.

Suddenly, and dramatically, and in a loud voice, Jesus cried out, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani." This was the language of his childhood; this was Aramaic.

This has been taken as the words from Psalm 22:1.

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Now Matthew translates or gives the equivalent of these words: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Now there is no ready explanation of this great cry that would satisfy your mind. I think of this as as a boy when I had the privilege of living on a farm, because on a farm it is better than in a city. A boy gets closer to the basic mysteries of life, of nature, and of God. The simplicity of rural life - one of my earliest memories is that of working in the fields all day, and the usual farm chores which were done in the evening, and then after the evening meal, to go outside on a summer night and gaze into the heavens. All sense of time vanished in the wonder of the glory of the star-studded sky. A full moon seemed to me like heavenly splendor. At that time I did not know a single planet, and I could only wonder at who and what might be on the moon.

Now several years have separated me from that farm, and yet it has never lost the sense of mystery of the heavens.

Life is full of mysteries both in the natural universe and in the spiritual realm. I have wondered many times about the origin of evil. The question why this great mystery.

And so I come this morning to speak to you about another great question:

Why? Both God and man ask this question. The land had been in darkness, and

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this message and meditation has a great mystery in it.

There have been several explanations of this scripture.

✓ First, there have been those who have reminded us that Jesus was quoting the 22nd Psalm.

✓ Second, others have suggested that he was dying the death of a martyr, and the agony of his body forced his cry from his lips. You remember, Jesus was a volunteer; he was laying down his life freely.

✓ In the third place, Martin (Luther) once set himself to study this saying of Jesus. For a long time he continued without food, in meditation, in one position in his chair; when at length he arose from his thoughts, he was heard to exclaim in amazement, "God, forsaken of God? Who can understand that?"

Now we may as well recognize from the outset that it is impossible for us to really understand this word. For one, we would need to go to hell and go there free from personal sin, and go as the Holy Son of God to understand it. No one ever will be in hell in that condition, but thank God our Saviour has made it forever unnecessary for us to experience, or even to understand, this fourth word from the cross.

Now there are some vital truths that I would like to explore with you which will help us to understand a part of this mystery.

I. Christ's sacrifice

We are on sure ground. The best insight we have into the sacrifice that Jesus made for sinners is here. He plunged himself into the very heart of the outer darkness. His agony was hidden from the eyes of those who looked on. The physical suffering - he was like an orphan, and this cry tells us all we need to know.

For one thing, it tells us something about the distance he traveled to save man.

His journey in search of the lost from heaven's throne was not complete until he had reached your need and mine, until he got to the place of God-forsakeness. Only there in the outer darkness did he reach the final journey, his destination. He deliberately started out for that point. He was not taken by surprise, nor did he turn from a straight path.

Now the fourth word sets forth this truth in several different ways. It is important that you not miss them.

First, the levitical ceremony. Every Israelite had seen the sins of the people symbolically laid on the head of the scapegoat which was driven into the howling wilderness.

That was a picture in prophesy of the Saviour carrying the sins of the

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world into the agonizing darkness and condemnation. Jesus is our scapegoat.

In the gospel of Luke there is a beautiful story of the good shepherd seeking the lost sheep. Not many of us see in that picture more than the returning shepherd with the wounded sheep across his shoulder. But the climax and the point of the parable is where he actually found the sheep. That was the place of the shepherd's bleeding body.

"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."

Third, Phillipians 2 : 5 and 8, Paul gives us a picture of the journey.

From the beginning he had the nature of God. Yet he did not regard equality with God as something at which he would grasp. Nay, he stripped himself of his glory and took on him the nature of a bond servant. By becoming a man like other men and being recognized as truly human, he humbled himself and even stooped to die, and that too a death on the cross.

Fourth, II Corinthians 5:21 makes it still more graphic: "He hath made him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness

of God in Him."

"He hath made him to be sin for us" is a figure of speech. The meaning then is not that he made him a sin offering, or a sinner, but the representative of sin. On him, representatively, fell the collective consequences of sin.

But let us not miss the meaning of that verse, Hebrews 12:3. "Name off your sins one by one: fornication, God made Jesus the representative of that and crushed it. Uncleanness, God made Jesus the representative of that and crushed it. Lasciviousness, God made Jesus the representative of that and crushed it. Idolatry, strife, wrath, factions, divisions, envyings, drunkenness, and such like, God made Jesus the representative of all these and crushed them in crushing him at the cross. The statement staggeres our minds. Think of gathering all the sin of humanity into one heap. What a mass of wickedness. Jesus came down to represent that mass that God might blot it out in one sufficient condemnation.

No wonder there arose such a cry of God-forsakenness from that sacrifice. He didn't have to do it. He did it only because of his love for us.

As Jesus went down and up the land, he issued an invitation to sinners:

"Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Matthew 11:28. Come publicans, come harlots, come murderers, come sinners all.

Did Jesus mean to say that he personally would endure all the agonies due them in the punishment of their sins? Did he mean that he would take on that which was a humanly impossible task of suffering? Did he mean that he would suffer the everlasting punishment for the guilt of all sinners on the cross?

Yes, that is what he meant. He must suffer the infinite depths of agony. God-forsakenness described those depths. "My God, my God, why - ?" For your hell and for mine, and for all the hells of all guilty sinners, he paid the price.

II. Hell's torment.

Sophisticated age, prone to reason away the Reality of hell -

There's a story of a minister who was preaching to a congregation of English fisherman. His subject was justification, and he was trying to make Christ's work on the cross clear and plain. He asked a question: "Now, will one of you tell me in your own words, what did the Lord Jesus do at the cross?"

An old fisherman with tears in his eyes looked up to the preacher and answered,

"He swapped with me."

In the agony of Jesus, we have an indication of the nature and the torment of hell. If he was not there in my stead as my representative doing business for me, then the agony he endured in the substitutionary process, if I refuse it, I must endure it.

If I refuse to allow him to substitute for me, his pain, his loneliness,

then what doom awaits the sinner? Everlasting condemnation. Now Jesus was not doing this for curiosity, but that he might warn us of what it means to reject.

The physical suffering of the cross was only the symbol of something worse. The darkness may have been sent to hide this in order that no one might be given a mistaken idea that this suffering, this physical suffering, was all there is to the agony of sin punishment.

The first part of this torment is suggested in the Saviour's cry: "Why?" "Why" is a word of hopelessness and a hopeless situation. It is a question of a baffled heart. It indicates that there is an insolvable problem that the mental thoughts cannot see through, and that the question goes on unanswered forever. No voice from heaven or a voice from earth offers to answer this question. That is a part of the hell that the unsaved must endure. Jesus wants us to see it. Why? Nothing happens. Only the echo rebounds, why, why, why?

The second part of the agony is demonstrated in the word forsaken. Forsaken is the saddest word in any language. Forsaken means to leave, meaning to abandon. It also suggests defeat and helplessness.

And it means to leave one in a place or in circumstances where he is totally without help. Forsaking someone in the state of defeat or helplessness

in the midst of hostile circumstances.

Jesus had known what it meant to be forsaken. His family forsook him, some of the members in Nazareth. His home town forsook him. The nation he came to save forsook him. And while he was on the cross, some of the disciples forsook him. Until now, at this point, the Heavenly Father had been in constant fellowship, but now God turns from him. Now don't ask me to explain this, because as I said at the outset, this is a mystery.

I think that Jesus was here helping men to see the real condition of being forsaken, that this is part of the worst agony a condemned man will ever know, being forsaken of God, separated from all that is good, separated from the concern of God. No light, for God is light. No love, for God is love. No life, for God is life. Deprived of all but death. And that he will endure this forever. He will never escape from pain, sorrow, disappointment, despair - there will be no escape.

Now the Bible gives us many other revelations that intensify and amplify the meaning and the terrors of this experience of those who are separated from God, and this is the destiny of every soul without Christ, all whose names are not written in the Lamb's Book of Life. The Son of God is representing a sinful humanity.

How can anyone be unconcerned about such a destiny? The fourth word from the heart of our suffering Christ should turn us to concern.

III. God's wrath.

Now I think the cross is a supreme revelation of love - the love of

God. As Isaac Watts said:

"See from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?"

Now it is true that love was here, but the revelation of the wrath of God - here is the condemnation of sin that must be borne by the one that is guilty.

The Bible is careful to call attention to the wrath of God, his hot anger in Judges 2:14, his displeasure, Deuteronomy 9:19. God is revealed as coming and pouring out the awful judgment upon the ungodly. Men are seen fleeing from God's wrath at the coming of the Lord, crying for the rocks and the hills to fall upon them and hide them from the certain storm.

But of all the revelations, we see his wrath in clearest demonstration at the cross. There the father forsook his son because on the cross Jesus was assuming responsibility for all the world's sin guilt.

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God's attitude towards sin forced him to turn his back on the dearest of all - His Son - at that moment. He knew that he would have to suffer alone, as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, Revelation 13:8. He set out upon the path of redemption until this lonely cry broke from his lips.

In the wilderness Jesus suffered, but the angel was sent to minister to him. In the garden, he sweat great drops of blood, but the Father's peace came to stay his soul. Divine sympathy never failed him, until he stood naked before the bar of eternal justice becoming the surety of lost men.

There are times and places for mercy and sympathy, but the day comes when offended justice drives them out. Punishment must be visited upon a substitute. Do we see God's wrath and understand that all unbelievers must appear before an angry God?

Now he pleads with the sinner to accept his mercy. Now he urges us to appropriate his grace. The rich man cried from his place begging for a drop of water only to be denied because perfect justice will be stern.

The truth is so clear that the Father's attitude toward his sin-bearing son, for the Judge will be none other than the Lamb that is slain.

Now it rejoices the heart of the believer to know that he will be judged

by the one who died for him. It can only fill the unbeliever with terror and fear to know that he will be judged by the one that he has despised and rejected.

Christ was careful to fulfill every point of the law.

Jonathan Edwards in American history was famous for his great sermon entitled, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." His listeners cried out for mercy as they heard him picture lost sinners dangling over the fires of hell suspended only by one string of a spider's web held firmly in the hands of God. At Enfield, there was such a breathing of distress that he was compelled to stop and request the people to retain their composure.

Surely it would be the same with unbelievers today if they could realize what it will mean to face the Saviour whose blood they have trampled underfoot.

The Saviour's judge who will avenge himself for their insulting rejection of his grace.

This was the errand of our Saviour, and there are three things in this fourth word. Christ's sacrifice, hell's torment, and God's wrath. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

In a few moments, Jesus will give the shout of victory. He has conquered.

What response was made to this demonstration? There was one response: the thief accepted the atoning sacrifice, and found mercy by yielding to his Saviour.

The important question is, What will you do about it? There is still time to accept the sacrifice, escape the torment, and satisfy the heart of God by turning the Christ now.

Some years ago, one of the members of our church told me of an experience, and she said that she was cooking supper and someone asked her could she explain the statement of Jesus: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

This goes to the very depth of our being. I remember reading of a speaker once who was giving a lecture, and he told a story of a condemned murderer serving a life sentence in Sing-Sing Prison some years ago. A girl had been stricken with leukemia. It was still hoped that if she could receive enough healthy blood, her life might be saved, though there was no assurance of it. But it could not be done through a tube. It must be done vein to vein, which meant that some of her diseased blood might infect the donor.

But this man volunteered. In some small way, that is what we Christians mean when we talk about the saving blood of Christ. And this was what was happening on the cross in that dark shadow of God's judgment for sin. He was being made sin for us. He was projecting himself into the wrath of the holiness of God. He was being identified with man, the only way for man to be saved. This was the point of no return for Christ. Jesus held fast - his personal

was revealed here when he said, "My God." Here is a love that never fails.

That never lets go.

As the poet said,

"I know not where his islands lift

their frond palms in air,

I only know I cannot drift

Beyond his love and care."

God is concerned, and its beneath the cross of Jesus that you can

discover this concern.

How for me hast won
Justice satisfied forever,
all God's pleasure done
Thus O smitten Rock! from Thee
Life eternal flows to me.