

The Word & the Words of the Cross

From the Introduction:

We are now going to listen to the words Christ uttered in his hours of pain upon the cross. As we will see, these words deal with forgiveness, with the coming of sinners into the Paradise of God, with family relationships, with alienation of the sinner from God, with spiritual barrenness and thirst, with the completion of God's plan for man's redemption, and with the offering up of the spirit to the Father Himself.

As we will see, when one is under the deepest of tensions and emotions one utters what has been called 'the utterance of the heart'. A scream is a wild thing. It is wrung out of one by pain or terror or some other emotion. A cry is different. It has purpose. It is directed somewhere. For those who listen with discernment it has meaning.

Christ's utterances were not screams. They were truly human cries, but cries. If we listen to them without bias, without conditioned presuppositions, then we will hear something. Without doubt the word of the Cross comes through quite clearly in the word uttered from the cross. It is essential that we hear them. It is not only an aid to understanding the word of the Cross. It is in fact indispensable for our true understanding.

Let us, then, hear these words, study them, contemplate them, meditate over them, and hear fully the true and saving word of the Cross.

Dr Geoffrey Bingham is an Anglican minister. His experience as soldier, prisoner of war, farmer, missionary, writer, teacher and family man, as well as theologian, has given him ground for writing material which is relevant to the society in which we live.

New Creation Publications Inc.



The WORD and the words of the Cross

STUDIES IN THE SEVEN WORDS OF THE CROSS
by Geoffrey Bingham

The WORD and the words of the Cross

STUDIES IN THE SEVEN WORDS OF THE CROSS

by Geoffrey Bingham

Published by
NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC., AUSTRALIA

First published 1982
Second edition 1992

© Geoffrey Bingham, 1982, 1992

National Library of Australia card number and
ISBN 0 949851 59 0

This book is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted
under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be
reproduced by any process without written permission.
Inquiries should be addressed to the publisher.

Cover design by Glenys Murdoch

Wholly set and printed at

NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC.
Coromandel East, South Australia

SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	vii
1:THE WORD AND THE WORDS:	1
2:THE FIRST WORD: <i>Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.'</i>	4
3:THE SECOND WORD: <i>This day you shall be with me in Paradise.'</i>	9
4: THE THIRD WORD: <i>'Woman, behold, your son!'</i> <i>'Son, behold, your mother!'</i>	12
5: THE FOURTH WORD: <i>My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?'</i>	15
6: THE FIFTH WORD: <i>'I thirst!'</i>	19
7: THE SIXTH WORD: <i>'It is finished!'</i>	24
8: THE SEVENTH WORD: <i>'Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit!'</i>	28
9: CONCLUSION REGARDING THE SEVEN WORDS:	33
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:	37

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

It is strongly recommended that those using these notes should obtain the six cassettes which accompany them. Their title is *Seven Words of the Cross*, and the code number for ordering is ITS. 20. They can be obtained by ordering through your local Christian Bookstore, or otherwise direct from the publishers.

They can also be borrowed from the New Creation Cassette Lending Library.

FOREWORD

In September 1980 the book *Cross Over the Abyss* was published. Some who read it saw that the heart of the book lay in the actual words of Jesus uttered from the cross. One group desired to abstract the chapters which covered these utterances, and to turn them into a study series for Lent.

The book *Cross Over the Abyss* has now been published as *Christ's Cross Over Man's Abyss*.

In doing this they asked whether there was other background material. We were able to supply them with cassettes which were even more comprehensive than the material in the book. Using both they pursued their series of studies. By the time they had completed the series something very rich had happened in most, if not all the lives, of those who gave themselves to the studies.

This has moved us to abstract the few pages which deal with the words of the Cross, as also to add a short introductory chapter, a concluding chapter, and some questions which could be used for the studies themselves.

There are difficulties in abstracting one section of a book. Obviously there are references backwards and forwards to other material in the original volume. On reading, this did not seem to present much of a problem, and we decided to leave the text as it was originally printed.

We send this small volume out in the hope that it will cause many to direct their thoughts to the Cross, and especially those immortal cries of the Son of man. Whilst the book can be used

for Lenten study, it may also be used at any time either personally or by study groups.

It is in the hope that it will prove useful that we send it out.

The Publishers

CHAPTER ONE

THE WORD AND THE WORDS

The Word of the Cross

Paul says, ‘The word of the cross is to those who are perishing, foolishness, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God’ (I Cor. 1:18). Paul is stating a fine principle, namely that the word of the Cross is a saving one. Initially it saves persons by showing them the love of God, bringing them to repentance, and so to salvation, i.e. justification by faith. In Romans 1:16–17 Paul outlines the liberating teaching of justification by *faith alone*. In fact his teaching is really that we are saved by *grace alone* (Rom. 3:24), of which *faith* is the appropriating instrument.

Whilst we are saved initially by grace alone, through faith, yet we go on being saved. This is what Paul is saying to us in I Corinthians 1:18. The Cross is a present power for the processes of salvation. The New Testament also talks about

salvation to come (cf. Rom. 8:23; 5:9–10). In one sense we can be sure in the present of our salvation because we were saved in the past. However, Paul also says, ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is working within you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure’ (Phil. 2:12–13). Thus salvation is a present process, and regarding this process Paul says the word of the Cross is the power of God. Doubtless it is the power of God for salvation—past, present, and future—but since we live in the present we want to discover its present power.

We need not here go into all this, except to say that the Cross delivers us from Satan (Heb. 2:14–15; cf. I John 3:8; John 12:31), from the evil principalities and powers (Col. 2:14–15), from guilt of sin (Rom. 5:1; 8:1–3), from the world (Gal. 6:14; cf. 1:4), from the flesh (Gal. 5:24; cf. Rom. 8:12), from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9; I Thess. 1:10), from the law (Gal. 2:19–20; Rom. 7:4–6; 6:7), and from death (I Cor. 15:55–56; II Tim. 1:10). Because we *have been* delivered from these enemies, we may live *in the present* without their domination. This is the power of the Cross.

The word of the Cross is really the truth of the Cross, or the uttered communication of it. That is why Paul is not ashamed of it, and says so in Romans 1:16–17. Not only has he seen it work with great power, but he has known its own power in his life. Paul is never a mere theoretician. This word has gripped him. It has dynamically changed him. Also, and at the same time, Paul has worked out the theology of the Cross. Having been a devout Jew under the law of Moses, and knowing the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, he has worked the matter through. He knows that what he preaches is what was formulated by God, announced by the prophets, and fulfilled in, and by, Christ. So then, it is to Paul a great word. In Romans 10:17 Paul says, ‘So then, faith comes

through hearing, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.’ This, then, is the word of the Cross.

The Words of the Cross

We are now going to listen to the words Christ uttered in his hours of pain upon the cross. As we will see, these words deal with forgiveness, with the coming of sinners into the Paradise of God, with family relationships, with alienation of the sinner from God, with spiritual barrenness and thirst, with the completion of God’s plan for man’s redemption, and with the offering up of the spirit to the Father Himself.

As we will see, when one is under the deepest of tensions and emotions one utters what has been called ‘the utterance of the heart’. A scream is a wild thing. It is wrung out of one by pain or terror or some other emotion. A cry is different. It has purpose. It is directed somewhere. For those who listen with discernment it has meaning.

Christ’s utterances were not screams. They were truly human cries, but cries. If we listen to them without bias, without conditioned presuppositions, then we will hear something. Without doubt the word of the Cross comes through quite clearly in the words uttered from the cross. It is essential that we hear them. It is not only an aid to understanding the word of the Cross. It is in fact indispensable for our true understanding.

Let us, then, hear these words, study them, contemplate them, meditate over them, and hear fully the true and saving word of the Cross.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FIRST WORD

'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.'

This word in Luke 23:34 was uttered when they were crucifying him. Crucifying is a painful death, and an opiate of some sort was given, not because of pity for the victim, but because often the one being crucified would go demented out of fear and pain. He would resist those who sought to crucify. His terror could drive him into manic states. The two thieves crucified with Christ received the opiate but he did not. He needed all his sensibilities to undergo the deeper suffering connected with evil.

The mob by this time was blood-crazed. Whilst this happens at most executions, this execution had another note which was even more fearful. The hatred of the entire human race was welling up against its God. He, the Son, had claimed affinity with the Most High, and so they set upon him. Rationality had faded and a horrible hatred was manifesting

itself. Other complications were there also; human shame at the betrayal of the Holy One, and despair that the Mission had not succeeded. Not only his enemies but some also of his friends were caught up in an hysteria of anger and hate.

As they hammered the flesh, driving in the nails, the two thieves were in a frenzy of fear, hatred and bitterness. Their antisocial anger flared into uttered blasphemy. Far from having a fellow-feeling for him, they berated Christ like the rest. They cursed, blasphemed, and spat out their words in irrational rage 'If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. Save yourself and us!'

This is precisely what he could not do. Because he was the Son of God he could not come down from the cross. It was because he was the Son of God that he had gone to the cross. Only the Son of God would go to the cross in that way.

Suddenly a miracle happened. One thief stopped his screaming. He fell silent. Then he addressed his fellow criminal in the most amazing terms. He said, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?' Such words from a man under execution are remarkable, but more remarkable because, moments before, he was berating Christ in a manner similar to that of his fellow criminal.

What changed him? What made him say, 'We are suffering justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; *but this man has done nothing wrong.*'?

How did he know? How did this amazing miracle happen? The answer is, 'The first utterance of Jesus.'

Something in that cry arrested the thief in his bitterness and completely transformed his mind. What was it? It was surely the uttered cry, 'Father!'

Later we will see that the Cross was all about Fatherhood, even more, in a sense, than it was about Sonship. What we do know is that one cry in the world is recognizable, and that

is the cry of a child to its parent. This utterance was from the Son to *the* Father.

Rightly understood, Fatherhood is what the universe is all about. Deep down in man there must be some memory, some intuitive understanding that this is so. However, it took the actual Son of the Eternal Father to come to earth in order to show the true Father. He had to spell out in the only terms that we know—human terms—the eternal truth of Fatherhood and Sonship, so that we could understand the truth of temporal fatherhood and sonship.

This revelation happened in the life and ministry of the Son, but supremely here on the cross in the life of the Son, and his quiet, confident relationship with the Father. Suddenly the thief understood both Fatherhood and Sonship. Doubtless his criminal record was connected—way back—with failure somewhere in regard to human fatherhood and his own sonship. However that may have been, here he was knowing that this twisted figure beside him was indeed Son of the Eternal Father. Yet that was not all.

‘Forgive them,’ Christ had prayed. All who looked up at him must have been astonished. Was it an act? Was this high priggishness? Was it true? Evidently it was true. If so, then they had sinned and he was sinless. If they were sinners then he had prayed an incredible prayer. Doubtless the thief saw that, and others too. They must have looked at him, some of them—aghast. His cross was a bloody mess. The globules of saliva and sputum mingled with the blood. Their jeers, taunts, and screams of hatred had mingled with the pain, and he was pleading for their forgiveness!

Who could understand? Yet had that cry not been uttered we would never have known the spirit of the Man. Nor would we have understood the heart of the Father. It is small wonder that the thief repented in a moment.

Yet that was not all. His petition went on, ‘They know not what they do!’

Was this possible? Surely they knew—all of them—what they were about! They knew they were crucifying him. You don’t hammer nails without knowing. You don’t cry, ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’ unless you understand what you are saying. What they did not understand was that that One on the cross was the only man in all history who understood the nature of sin, for he was the only man in all history who had never sinned. Sin is an irrational invasion of the true human spirit and dehumanizes man from his true creational being. Only he knew that, with his Father. Paul said later, of the rulers, ‘Had they known they would not have crucified the Lord of glory!’ Did they then know that he was truly the Son of God? Christ had agreed with the High Priest that he, Christ, was indeed the Son, and that ecclesiastic had been enraged. *He had not stopped to enquire whether in fact Christ was indeed what he claimed to be, that is, the Son of God.*

So they did not know, and Christ knew they did not know. What is more, he understood the devilish nature of the deceit of sin. No one in all history really knows the true nature and extent of sin, even one sin, let alone the whole mass of it. But Christ knew it. One poet came close to understanding it when he said:

Who would know Sin, let him repair
Unto Mount Olivet: there shall he see
A man so wrung with pains that all his hair,
His skin, his garments bloody be.
Sin is that press and vice which forceth pain
To hunt his cruel food through every vein.

Who knows not Love, let him assay
And taste that juice which on the Cross a pike
Did set again abroach; then let him say

If ever he did taste the like.
 Love is that liquor sweet and most divine
 Which my God feels as blood, but I as wine.

Christ, then, had gone to the extreme in love in order to pray to the Father, to seek the forgiveness of the human race, and to understand mankind in its sin; something none had previously done.

This cry, of course, puts humanity into a bracket it had not previously known. It is now understood and forgiven. Now it, too, must understand and forgive. That is the crux of the Cross.

(N.B. For discussion questions on this study, see page 37.)

CHAPTER THREE

THE SECOND WORD

‘This day you shall be with me in Paradise.’

The thief was deeply moved. He was moved to repentance. Repentance is a change of mind. This change of mind is radical, reaching down to the roots of a man’s being. Following repentance, then, a man is never what he was before. The thief had drunk in all that Jesus had said, and he had comprehended, at least as much as was needed for him to understand at that point.

He who had mocked Christ’s claim to be the Son of God now accorded that claim to him. ‘Lord,’ he said. He addressed this twisted victim on crude timbers as Lord! ‘Lord,’ he prayed, ‘remember me when you come into your own.’ There are many possible translations: ‘Remember me when you come into your kingly power.’ ‘Remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ ‘Remember me when you come into your own.’

Whatever he said he certainly believed Christ was the Messiah, and he believed in the Kingdom. In this he was a good Jew and a poor criminal. In some strange way, deep down in his gut, the truth had broken through. God was Father. God forgave. God understood.

Who understands a thief? Christ had said, 'All who came before me were thieves and robbers.' He saw them as spawn of the Thief, Satan himself. He was referring to false shepherds who abused and used the sheep, having no compassion. Other parts of Scripture tell us the evil of thieving. It is one of many forms of rebellion against the true order of the universe. In Ephesians 4:28 Paul gives the principle of theft on the one hand, and work on the other. 'Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labour, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need.' Thieving is taking away what another possesses; true work is *labouring in order to give to him who has need*. This noble doctrine of work is doubly defaced by the evil of stealing. Stealing is a form of idolatry, coveting things for one's own security and stealing the (even if only imagined) security of another.

Jesus understood, but then he was intent upon the change and the request of the erstwhile thief. 'Today,' he said simply, 'you will be with me *in a garden*.'

Paradise means primarily *a garden*. The nostalgia of man is evoked by the word. There in the beginning was the Garden, the Eden of delight. There man had had fellowship with God and walked with Him in the cool of the day. Sin had caused his exit from that beautiful place. Serenity was thus destroyed, and true human delight was never again to be the same. The flaming sword of the cherubim was to keep the way to the tree of life. Yet, somehow, this crude tree, this bloodied wood on which Christ hung, had become the tree of life! The thief now was hearing unbelievable words, 'Today you will be with me

in a Garden.' Back to the Garden!

The curiously minded will ask, 'What is Paradise? Where is it? Who goes there?', and the like, but the thief knew, and we know that Paradise is where Christ is, and Paradise is to walk with him in the Garden. Paradise is to be in fellowship again with God. This is what the Garden means.

(N.B. For discussion questions on this study, see page 37.)

CHAPTER FOUR

THE THIRD WORD

**‘Woman, behold, your son!’
‘Son, behold, your mother!’**

So much of Christ is obviously familial. Indeed almost all of him is familial. He is Son. He relates to the Father. Hence it was said of him in relation to man, ‘He was not ashamed to call them brethren.’ Psalm 22:22 is quoted of him (in Heb. 2:12), ‘I will tell of thy name to my brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will praise thee.’ Before his death he said to his Father, ‘I have declared thy name unto them.’ He did just this as he uttered his first cry on the cross.

It is a principle that the relationship heavenwards must produce the very best relationships earthwards. Christ lived commendably as a son of his earthly parents. We gather that Joseph had died early in Jesus’ lifetime. Jesus had a rich relationship with his mother. He was nothing if not domestic. The Gospels give us cameos and vignettes of this domesticity. He is always about helping families. He healed the son of a

nobleman, raised the son of a needy widow, and so on. One of his most domestic acts was to save a wedding from disaster by quietly replenishing the supply of much-needed wine.

On that occasion he had used the harsh word, ‘Woman’, in addressing his mother. She knew he was Messiah. Eager to encourage him she had urged the use of his powers. He had said, in effect, ‘I do the Father’s will, not the mother’s.’ He put this same demand on others. In this sense they too had to love the eternal Father before an earthly father. Then, of course, they would truly love that earthly father, also.

He had, so to speak, thrown a douche of cold water in the face of Mary his mother. She had not, it seemed, minded at all. She had said to the servants, ‘Whatever he says unto you, do it.’ Her confidence lay in his relationship with the Father.

Now, on the cross, he was quietly severing another element of her relationship with him. Once again he called her, ‘Woman!’ She had once sung, ‘My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.’ Now he was being her Saviour and not merely only her son. She must know that. At the same time he had compassion. The Gospels show us that the actual brethren of Jesus were by no means sympathetic with him. In fact to the contrary (cf. John 7:1f.; Matt. 12:46), they had not even believed in him. Jesus had once cried, pointing to his disciples, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.’

Now he was caring for her, and giving her over to the disciple whom he loved. So intimate had that one been with Jesus, that he would certainly have cared for Jesus’ mother. The Gospel says, ‘And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home’. Jesus knew her human thrust of feeling and sentiment would be to suffer greatly because he was *her son*, but he wanted her to know he was *the Son*, so that her grief

would be somewhat ameliorated in the understanding that the suffering of the Cross was God's love for all men and no less for her. He would lift her to an even higher plane of suffering sympathy.

So the cry he gave is the true confession of the high value of domesticity. It speaks of all families everywhere. It calls for the sanctification of family relationships. At that time, as now, it spoke into the fearsome mixture of cruelty, bestiality, and inhuman relationships which had brought him to the Cross.

In some way that cry hallows all family relationships for all time. In the deepest stress a Man remembers graciously the commitment of family love.

(N.B. For discussion questions on this study, see page 38.)

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FOURTH WORD

'My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?'

Matthew and Mark both record this cry. Some took it either mistakenly, or deliberately (in order to confuse the issue), as a cry to Elijah. Through history the cry itself proved to be unintelligible to many. One explanation given is that God in accordance with Habakkuk 1:13 could not look upon His Son as sin. It is doubtful whether this could be true. Another explanation is that Jesus had subjective feelings of forsakenness. In other words he was not actually forsaken but only thought he was. This too, is unintelligible. A third explanation is that he intended to convey the prophetic elements contained within Psalm 22 by crying the introductory utterance of that Psalm. Doubtless he did convey the context of Psalm 22, but the cry is patently what it indicates. *He was forsaken of God.* It is difficult to know why there should be any objection to this

simple, though painful, truth.

What else is the true judgement upon sin but separation from God? If he were not separated, then would sin have been really dealt with? If this alienation of the human spirit from God is the very essence of wrath, then was God's wrath really poured out on the Cross upon sin, and was it borne by him if he were not forsaken? The answer must surely be, 'Yes, the wrath was poured out upon sin and for man's sake he was forsaken.'

Some object, saying the Trinity would have been split by such an action. This, however, need not have been the case. Indeed, by the nature of the case, the Trinity cannot be split. He died as Man for men. *He died in his humanity*. His cry was not 'My Father! My Father!', but 'My God! My God!' Truly he was Man for men. If it be urged that because of his innate deity he would have known he was not forsaken, then we must take back other words uttered by Christ in his humanity. For example, when he said, 'But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only' (cf. Mark 13:32).

What we fail to understand is the utter desolation that is indicated by the cry. If to be forsaken is the utterness of suffering (and it is), then he actually has to suffer this. If some special knowledge tells him he is not *essentially* forsaken then he does not suffer to the full. Let us understand this: *he did suffer to the full*.

Failure to understand this cry is failure to understand the terrible nature of sin and the high wrath of the Eternal Holy God, who must destroy evil by His burning action of holiness. It is He who participates in that Cross by Himself bringing wrath down upon sin. It is God who is in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, but to do that He must deal drastically, indeed terribly, with sin. He must judge sin in his (Christ's) flesh (Rom. 8:3). This He does in making him to be

sin, and then afflicting and smiting him. Only when the conscience, by revelation of the Spirit, sees that fact, will man be truly at peace.

Today there is a psychiatric therapy called Primal Therapy, and it is to do with what has been called 'the Primal Scream'. Arthur Janov, the initiator of this therapy, discovered that there is a terrible scream which man emits (especially neurotic man) when he begins, even against his will, to cry, 'Mummy! Daddy!' Janov believes that a child's alienation from its parents causes the most dreadful things to happen deep down in the person. This kind of therapy brings a release. The Primal Scream, he maintains, comes from Primal Pain which he sees to exist in those who in some sense become separated relationally from their parents. What this signifies in terms of man being separated from his Father could be breath-taking.

However, on the cross Christ uttered no *scream*. A scream is something drawn (or uttered) involuntarily. For three hours Christ had been silent on the cross. Doubtless he was contemplating much. Doubtless he was suffering excruciatingly. No cry is, so to speak, ripped from him. Screams are an involuntary expression of pain, terror, horror, and the like. They are also a terrified plea for help. Christ does not scream in terror or plead for help. In all of this, even in his cry of dereliction, Christ is master of his situation. He has borne the unbelievable suffering of separation, but he is not destroyed, only bewildered, only suffering deeply.

If we look at Psalm 22 in its entirety we will come closer to understanding something of the suffering. It is a combination of the elements we have already mentioned. All evil powers are present to taunt and to accuse, and he must take the sting of them, as also the sting of death. He must take the weight of sin, its fiery penalty, its innate components of wrath. He must feel the smothering evil of human filth and moral pollution.

He must know the dreadful anger of God upon all sin. He must as man be taken from the Holy Presence and go out into the place of the damned. He must suffer it all, or not at all.

And he does. In doing this he painfully, but fully, explicates the love of the Father. There must be no talk of God being personally wrathful with His Son, but there must be talk of the Son bearing the wrath of God upon evil, or no theodicy will ever prove valid.

In other words, *he is forsaken!* What almost crushed him to death in the garden of Gethsemane is here given its full outworking. The sword which was to be bared against the Fellow of God (Zech. 13:7; cf. Matt. 26:31–39; Heb. 5:7–8; 2:9–10), is not only bared *but it strikes!* The horror of the sinful body of humanity, the evil of the Serpent, the pollution of the human spirit—all of these are borne to extinction, and so the cry is not only of Janov’s Primal Pain, but of all pain of humanity for all time.

‘We did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his wounds, our wounds are healed.’ ‘Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.’ ‘His form was so marred, that he was not recognizable as a man.’

Of course. The prophet had sensed wonderingly the terrible alienation of the Suffering Servant. Likewise Jeremiah had sensed the same agony of spirit:

‘Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look and see
if there is any sorrow like my sorrow
which was brought upon me,
which the Lord inflicted
on the day of his fierce anger.’

(N.B. For discussion questions on this study, see page 38.)

CHAPTER SIX

THE FIFTH WORD

‘I thirst!’

This utterance, recorded in John 19:28–30, has a surround to it. It is this: ‘After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfil the Scripture), “I thirst.” A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of the vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the vinegar . . .’

For some this cry, ‘I thirst,’ is a mechanical fulfilment of the prophecy indicated in Psalm 69 (a Messianic Psalm), verses 3 and 21. The simplest solution is to see that he was actually thirsty, and he cried to let that thirst be known, and by so doing also made it clear that the prophecy was fulfilled. Somehow his thirst was, so to speak, a prophetic indispensability.

Doubtless he cried this out of a dreadful physical thirst, but no less out of an aridity of spirit, an inner dryness which had come about through his suffering. He had commenced his

suffering with a plenitude of personal spirit, and was ending with having utilized all his resources.

In order to understand this we need to see that God is the God of plenitude, and no less is this plenitude in His Son and His Spirit. Out of their plenitude, they created as One the entire creation. Out of the same fullness they have sustained the creation through the millenniums of time. God is known in a number of places of Scripture as 'the fountain of living waters'. The picture is of a gushing fountain flowing out, unaided, from its own source. The great elements of love and goodness, righteousness, truth and holiness flow endlessly from God, supplying man's needs on every level of his being, and also supporting and sustaining the entire creation.

Man is told, 'Keep your heart with all diligence for from it flow the issues of life.' He, being in the image of God, is to be an under-fountain. He is to supply others with these vital practical issues. God has made him so, and he is thus to function.

Wonderful as is this truth, it points to yet another truth, namely that man is a dependent creature. He is totally contingent upon God. God formed him of the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life. At best, man is a fascinating living creature. Minimally, he is simply a handful of dust. He is dust and glory with a wonderful destiny, yet he seeks to avoid the destiny God has set for him. Sin has made him seek to be independent of God and dependent only upon himself. Even so, it is still true that man, in God, 'lives and moves and has his being'.

The abundancy of God ought to be a theme which fascinates humanity, but sadly enough it does not. A statement like 'The river of God is full of water,' or 'There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God,' are concepts which do not attract man. He is fascinated by what he considers to be

his own resources. He professes to find depths which he can never exhaust, within himself. In a sense he is right for he has become a creature fascinated by God's creation, whilst not loving the Creator. The complexity within him is often, sadly enough, that of sinful propensities. The image of God has gone into reverse!

What, however, of the One on the cross? He understands the utterance of the psalmists, 'As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God! My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.' 'O God, thou art my God, I seek for thee, my soul thirsts for thee; my flesh faints for thee, as in a dry and weary land *where there is no water.*' 'My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord.' 'I stretch out my hands to thee; my soul thirsts for thee like a parched land!' He also understands that it is sin which brings aridity. Psalm 107:33-34 has it, 'He turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground, a fruitful land into a salty waste, because of the wickedness of its inhabitants'. The explanation is simple. Man is continuously dependent upon God for the supply of life, and when he turns from God he becomes arid. His sin makes him dry and lifeless. Hence God's admonition through Jeremiah (2:13), '. . . for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.' Man creates cisterns for himself, but they crack and become empty, and man is a dried-out creature, an effigy only of his former true self.

The woman who came to the well was told that if she drank of the supply on which she had depended she would thirst ever and again, but if she drank of the water of life it would be in her a fountain springing up, reaching up to eternal life. That sterile, fruitless creature became suddenly vivified and began to flow out to others.

Jesus then took into himself the entirety of the aridity of sin. In suffering the sinfulness of man he absorbed into himself man's dreary dryness. In the Great Separation he had to go out into the sere places of man's sin, and the waterless wastes of the human spirit. He could take with him what he had, but these supplies he could not replenish; not anyway until the Work was completed.

Only those who have suffered the torments of thirst will understand, even if triflingly, something of what he suffered. The rich man in Hades was in torment of an insatiable thirst which was not allowed even a drop of water upon the tongue. It was *an endless thirst*. Such Christ experienced in the dark lonely hours of the Cross. He was in waterless places, drawing on his supplies of spirit until they were exhausted and finished. Doubtless they proved enough to fulfil the task, but not to evade the fearsome thirst.

In Psalm 22:14 and 15 he says, 'I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax, it is melted within my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws; thou dost lay me in the dust of death.' Note the phrases, 'I am poured out like water', 'my strength is dried up like a potsherd', 'my tongue cleaves to my jaws', 'thou dost lay me in the dust of death'.

Ah, that is it! The dust of death. Man is dry, oh so dry of himself, and it is that dryness, the very dryness of death that Christ takes to himself. In those moments he must have remembered the invitation of the prophet, 'Ho, every one who thirsts, come ye to the waters, and drink!' Or the promise, 'I will pour out water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground.' Or, '... waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.'

So, then, he thirsted, he who had promised, 'out of your belly shall flow rivers of living water.' He was the one who

thirsted, and he wished to witness to the fact that he had thirsted so that men need never thirst again. So he cried, 'I thirst.'

Some have felt he ought not to have received any drink, sour vinegar though it was. This is a trifling thought. There was no need for him to reject the last thoughtful action of man—if indeed it were that—for already he had finished his work. He was not a Stoic working out a stint. He was a truly human person thirsting in a physical way, but then thirsting in a way no man had ever wholly thirsted. In him were all the thirsts of men, for all time. Now he would be the only one competent to satiate true thirst.

He now could promise, 'They that hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled.' Also he would be filled with the knowledge that the river of life, flowing down the centre of the City of God, was the life-giving stream which he had opened by his own suffering and his thirst (Rev. 22:1–2). This alone was enough. This was the joy which had been set before him, making him endure the Cross and despise the shame. For him the sight of man drinking of the water of life would be beautiful. To see rivers of life flowing from men would crown his joy. The awful anguish of thirst would be matched by the satiation desperate sinners would discover.

(N.B. For discussion questions on this study, see pages 38–39.)

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SIXTH WORD

'It is finished!'

This second last cry in John 19:30 is a *loud cry*. It is not the cry of someone who is weak. Doubtless Christ had been weakened physically by the whole experience, but there is no weakness of his spirit. Thirsty he may have been, but he is in a position to be replenished. He has completed the work. There is nothing more to do.

The cry is a cry to God. It is a cry to man. It is an announcement that what he has come for is now completed. It is also a cry to himself. He is telling himself he has succeeded. Doubtless, also, it is a cry to the powers of darkness that he has settled their doom forever.

The cry, '*Tetelestai!*' as we have seen contains the word *telos*, i.e. the *goal* or the *end*. All the time he has worked towards this. He had told his mother at the wedding feast, 'My time is not yet.' He had given this message to his manipulating brothers in John 7:6–8, when he had said, 'My time is

not yet fully come.' He was always aware of the time. He had said to his disciples, 'We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day: night comes when no man can work.' He had added on another occasion, 'Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any one walks in the day, he does not stumble . . . but if any one walks in the night, he stumbles.' He was conscious of time, but of the right time. When tempted to withdraw from his true hour he had said, 'And what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour?" No, for this purpose I have come to this hour.' He had added, '*Now* is the judge-ment of this world, *now* shall the ruler of this world be cast out.'

In John 13:1 we read, '. . . Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world'. In John 17:1 he prayed, 'Father, the hour has come.' His hour, then, was the hour of the Cross. In that same prayer he said, 'I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do.' In that prayer, nevertheless, he knew he had one more thing to do—*the work of the Cross!* Away back in the midst of his ministry he had said, 'My Father has always worked and I go on working [with him].' He had added, 'The Son does nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing: for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing; and greater works than these will he show him, *that you may marvel.*' Now the greater works were to take place, the works of the Cross and the Resurrection.

We have already seen that three times during the course of his ministry (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:32), Christ had shown the necessity of the Cross and Resurrection. Now he was about to complete these works.

What, then, were the things he had to do? What was it he finished so that he could claim it was accomplished?

The Works of the Work of the Cross

The Old Testament prophesied what he would do. The New Testament also expresses many of the purposes of his coming. I John 3:8 says plainly, ‘For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil’. Hebrews 2:14–15 supports this: ‘. . . that he through death might destroy him who has the power of death, even the devil’. Christ said he would cast out the prince of this world. He said, ‘I am come that they might have life,’ and this over and against the thief who had come only to steal, kill and destroy (John 10:10). The first work, then, was to destroy evil and take away the weapon of Satan, namely the fear of death.

Hebrews 9:26 says, ‘He hath appeared in these last days to put away sin’. Jesus had promised, ‘If the Son therefore shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.’ Later Paul was to comment, ‘This is a true saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.’ Paul also was to say, ‘He gave himself for our sins that he might pluck us up out of this present evil age.’ Jesus had said at the last, ‘This is my blood which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins.’ Christ, then, had completed this work of complete salvation from sin, namely its power, its penalty, its pollution, and ultimately, its presence.

His third work was to transform man. Paul said, ‘We thus judge that if one died for all *then did all die*. He died that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves but *unto him* who died for them and rose again.’ This is the reverse of the Fall where man died to God and became alive to himself.

Paul also shows that Lordship was Christ’s great goal. ‘For this cause Jesus both died and rose again, that he might be Lord, both of the dead and of the living.’ Doubtless he was, by

creation, Lord over the dead and living, but now as the man Jesus he is Lord in his own right, of the dead and the living. It is the Man who reigns at the right hand of God where never man reigned before.

Finally—although among many other things, Jesus completed the work of sonship. Galatians 4:4–6 has it, ‘But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”’ Redemption, then, is the work of the Cross, but note that it is *with a view to sonship*, i.e. ‘that we might receive the sonship’.

Thus Christ has done all things. He has borne the penalty of sin in the form of the curse and the wrath. He has satisfied the just demands of the law. He has wrested the Satanic weapon of the fear of death, and has substituted the deliverance of love. He has revealed the Father in the work of the Cross, and drawn man to sonship. Nothing has been left undone. Thus when he cries, ‘It is finished!’, Paul can echo that cry by stating, ‘There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.’ It is the authentication of Christ’s own promises. ‘He that believes in me shall not come into judgement, but has passed from death into life.’ It gives teeth to his statement to the woman taken in adultery, ‘Neither do I condemn you, go, and sin no more!’

(N.B. For discussion questions on this study, see page 39.)

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SEVENTH WORD

‘Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit!’

Again we are told the cry was a loud one. It was not the last gasp of a dying, exhausted person, but the strong utterance of one in full possession of his faculties. It was not a scream but a cry. To the last he had control of all things. So clear is this that when the centurion who had watched all things and heard all his cries, saw the death, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!’ He knew the death was not that of a defeated person, but of one triumphant. He knew this Man was guiltless of blasphemy. As he had claimed to be, so was he, the Son of God.

The finale to his life must have been magnificent. He had previously said, concerning his life, ‘I have authority to lay it down. I have authority to take it again.’ He had added, ‘None takes it from me.’ In fact he uses a neuter pronoun, and this

indicates that not only does no man, but no thing such as, say, an evil power or even Satan himself, have power to take his life. He is Lord to the last. Having accomplished all things, nothing, then, has victory over him, not then in the suffering, much less now at the very last.

It is possible to give up the spirit. The writer saw this happen with many dispirited soldiers in a Japanese prison camp. Tired men desired to live no longer and passed into death. Not so this Man: his was no weary resignation. Having done what he had to do he had no more to do. There was no point in remaining any longer. He would go to the Father.

This had been the thought in those last days in Jerusalem. We saw that he had known when his hour had come. John 13:1 has it, ‘. . . Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father.’ 13:3 says, ‘Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and *was going to God . . .*’ Later that night he told his disciples he was going to the Father to prepare a place for them in his Father’s mansions. ‘You know,’ he said, ‘the way where I am going.’ When they denied this he said, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.’ He was saying, ‘By me you can go where I am going—to the Father.’

Later he had chided them for not entering into the spirit of his last hours. ‘If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father.’ Again he had said, ‘. . . now I am going to him who sent me, but none of you asks me, “Where are you going?” But because I have said these things sorrow has filled your heart.’ They had then plied him with questions, one of them asking about the statement, ‘because I go to the Father.’ Finally he had encouraged them by saying, ‘. . . the Father himself loves you because you have loved me, and have believed that I came from the Father.’ He had

added, 'I came from the Father and have come into the world: again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father.'

It would be easy, therefore, to miss the deep importance of the last word of the Cross. 'Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit', was his signal to the world that he was going to the Father. If he were not going and were not accepted, then he was not the Son. If, having done the work of the Cross he were unaccepted, then the work of the Cross was empty and in vain. That is why he had said, 'The Spirit . . . will convict the world . . . of righteousness *because I go to the Father.*' If, having done the work he is accepted by the Father, then the work of righteousness is completed. Had he not said at his baptism, 'It becomes us to fulfil all righteousness,' it would be difficult for us to understand the great joy he must have felt at that moment, for the task was completed and he *was going home*. Soon he would see the Father and again be in His bosom (cf. John 1:18).

No Fear of Death

The serenity of Jesus at the last must have some known or declared basis. His last word is in fact from the Old Testament, and gives us the clue as to the action of those hours of the Cross. Psalm 31:1-5 needs to be read closely:

In thee, O Lord, do I seek refuge;
 let me never be put to shame; in thy righteousness
 deliver me!
 Incline thy ear to me, rescue me speedily!
 Be thou a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me!
 Yea, thou art my rock and my fortress;
 for thy name's sake lead me and guide me,
 take me out of the net which is hidden for me,

for thou art my refuge.
 Into thy hand I commit my spirit;
 thou has redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

Note the thrust of this passage. The psalmist is in deep trouble, and needs help. His trust is in God. Hence he says, 'Into thy hand I commit my spirit; *thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God!*' At the end Jesus is directing his listeners to this truth.

If we need more proof then surely it is the use of Psalm 16 by Peter on the day of Pentecost which confirms our thoughts. Notice also Paul uses this Psalm (Acts 13:35-37), and most probably it was one of those Scriptures which Christ gave after his resurrection to his disciples. Perhaps he had used it even before his death (cf. Luke 24:44, '... while I was still with you, that everything written about me . . . in the psalms must be fulfilled'). In any case we are entitled to believe he had it in his mind in the last hours.

Look then at the statement, 'He is at my right hand that I may not be shaken,' and, 'Therefore my heart was glad and my *tongue rejoiced*; moreover *my flesh will dwell in hope.*' Why? Because, 'Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades [Death], nor let thy Holy One see corruption.' As if this were not enough he adds, 'Thou hast made known to me *the ways of life*. Thou wilt make me full of gladness with thy presence.'

Peter interprets categorically, 'Nor did his flesh see corruption.' Is he saying that Jesus' body in no way deteriorated in the tomb? It seems hard to understand it otherwise. If this be the case then no wonder Jesus was pleased to commit his spirit to the Father. Ahead was only joy. No gloom or doom hovered about his head as a dark and threatening cloud. There was no sting to this death for he had drawn that very sting. Death no more had dominion over him! The work was finished. He was about to enter into the joy of his Lord.

We can only conclude, then, that his last act was one of wholesome submission. As he had submitted ever, as the Son, so now also he submitted. This, of course, does not mean a conflict of his will was resolved. Such a conflict had never existed. He had always been submitted. He signifies to man that the Father is not to be feared but loved; not dreaded but trusted. His submission, then, shows that at the last what matters most of all is the Fatherhood, and of course, with it, the Sonship.

(N.B. For discussion questions on this study, see pages 39–40.)

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION REGARDING THE SEVEN WORDS

We have said that the word of the Cross is shown in essence by the words of the Cross. Review them and this claim will be seen to be true. There is communication of the Fatherhood, thus affirming the true Sonship. There is the request for, and so promise of, forgiveness. There is understanding of the sinner and his sin. There is the promise that repentant man is immediately joined to Christ and his Paradise. There is the underlining of the importance of the temporarily domestic, derived as it should be from the Eternally Domestic. Then there is the cry of dereliction which tells us that the utmost in suffering has been experienced and expended, leading to the further cry that all is complete. Whilst Christ's work in one sense will not be finished until the judgement (cf. I Cor. 15:24–28; Rev. 11:15), yet the work which is the basis for

salvation and the defeat of evil is most certainly completed. Man, then, does not have to work for salvation. Thus Christ has thirsted that repentant man may never need to thirst, for through Christ's thirsting man can now be satiated. Finally there is no need for fear of death, since death is joyous, a simple going to the Father.

What then, in all the word of the Cross, is missing in these deep revelations? The answer must be, 'Nothing. Nothing, whatever!'

Having said that nothing is lacking it remains for us to see that fact, and to make its practical application in our lives. In the *First Word* we see Christ's cry for forgiveness of all. That men needed forgiveness there was no doubt in his mind. The Father was arranging that forgiveness through the Cross. Down through history this word of Jesus has been like a sword in many a heart. He was reviled but reviled not again. Men do not go out to give forgiveness. They go out to find justice for the wrong done them. The application of the first word is the full forgiveness of others—parents, brethren, children, friends, and—of course—enemies!

In the *Second Word* we see the whole saga of mankind. Once a glorious creature, man has lost the glory and the bliss and joy of the Garden, the Paradise God made for man. The Cross tells us that the way back to the Garden is opened afresh. Man may now go to God his Father. Even so, this word is one which is in the background of our thinking. Whilst we have peace with God here in this world, and perfect love casts out fear, yet the totality of Paradise is a coming thing. That word assures us that our hope is well based.

The *Third Word* tells us that relationships count. God is our Father. Christ is our elder Brother. The church is our mother. The family of God is the family in which we live. Christ did not forget his familial obligations even in the pain of his

death. At no point should we be faithless to ours.

The *Fourth Word* is one which offends human hearers. It seems to confirm that God is less a Father and more a severe and holy King. It seems to confirm the views we have had of God. Those views really determine the way we live, and the relationships we exercise. Hence we have to see that holiness will have no dealings with evil. Purity has no truck with defilement. Yet the suffering of evil has been borne in the alienation that Jesus knew as Man-for-men. That deep loneliness has passed for the human race. It may still be there for the finally impenitent, but even they will know they did not need to go through it. One—the true Son—had been through it for them. It means, then, that we should never alienate another. There is no ground or cause—not ever again—for alienation in human relationships. This, then, links with the three previous words, confirming them strongly.

The *Fifth Word* tells us that Christ thirsted our thirst before the Father. His resources were brought to their very end, but he could still apply to the Father for his needs. God is the Fountain of Living Waters, man the under-fountain. Even so, his true streams have run dry, but with the coming of Christ and then the Spirit, rivers of living water may now issue from us to others (John 7:37–39). This is what has happened in Christian history, and this because of the Atonement. The Spirit flows from within us, bringing his rivers of grace and love to a deeply needy world. We have this power of the Cross to make us useful and enriching in the community of mankind.

The *Sixth Word* is, of course, the one of triumph. The work of salvation is complete. Even so, the proclamation must go on, and the resources of the Atonement be used daily in the lives of God's people. They may go out in assurance, but not, of course, in highhandedness, self-sufficiency, or presumption.

Every moment every believer will be needy, dependent upon the rich resources of grace and love. We have these resources, not only for our own selves, but for others, the truly needy ones.

The final word of the Cross—*the Seventh*—is a word of serenity. There is no need to fear the grave. The Father has that in hand. The word of Christ is that we shall never die (John 11:26), whilst the life of the Spirit assures us that we shall be raised from the dead (Rom. 8:9–11). If he, the Son, could quietly trust his spirit, i.e. his being, to the Father, then so may we. Not only in death, but in life, and at every moment. The great work of the Cross assures us of the Father’s love, and His never-receding presence.

These words, then, of the Cross are great words. What then in all the word of the Cross, and the words of the Cross is missing? The answer, as we have said, must be, ‘Nothing! Nothing whatever is missing!’

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Word Study One (Ch. 2)

1. Why did the Son ask the Father to forgive? Was he not already the forgiving Father (see Luke 15)? What, then, do we make of such verses as Exodus 34:7 and Nahum 1:3 (*RSV*)?
2. How do we link this cry with Jeremiah 31:31–34 and Matthew 26:28?
3. What did Jesus mean by saying, ‘They know not what they do’? What do we mean by ‘the deceit of sin’?

Word Study Two (Ch. 3)

1. What was it that caused the thief to repent and ask Christ to remember him in his Kingdom? What was ‘your Kingdom’?
2. What is the true meaning of ‘this day’? What does Paradise mean?
3. How could we apply this word to our lives?

Word Study Three (Ch. 4)

1. Was not the word ‘woman’ harsh? Why did Jesus use it? Would Mary have been hurt or helped by its use?
2. Why should Mary have needed a ‘son’ other than Jesus? What possible help could John have been to Mary or Mary to John? What does this word say generally of familial relationships?
3. How could we apply the thoughts of this word in our daily living, and especially in our near familial relationships?

Word Study Four (Ch. 5)

1. What are some of the interpretations of this cry? How do they stand in the light of Psalm 22?
2. It is said that man does not see God as He really is—the God of grace and truth. How would this seeming rejection by God of His Son tend to affect humans already angry with Him? Has man a right to be angry with God?
3. So far as we can judge, what actually happened to Christ to cause him to utter his terrible cry? What has that suffering accomplished for us?

Word Study Five (Ch. 6)

1. What connection with Psalm 69 is there with this cry? What ‘proof’ do we have that this Psalm was in Christ’s mind when he suffered?

2. Trace the connections between Jeremiah 2:13; Proverbs 4:23; 25:26; and John 4:13–14; 6:35; 7:37–39. What, then, was the thirst of Christ? Was it only physical?
3. If Christ is the ‘smitten rock’ (cf. I Cor. 10:4; Isa. 53:4–6; Num. 20:11) then in what sense are we also ‘smitten rocks’, i.e. what can flow from us to others? How can ‘the word of the Cross’ be effective?

Word Study Six (Ch. 7)

1. What, in fact, had Christ finished? We say that in the *work* of the Cross were the *works* of the Cross. What were these?
2. What value has this cry for us in our daily practical living? For example, how does the cry link with (a) Romans 5:1; (b) Romans 8:1; (c) I Corinthians 6:11?
3. What work of God continues today because of the ‘finished work of Christ’? Could this continuing work be true and effective if the Cross work had been unfinished?

Word Study Seven (Ch. 8)

1. It appears that Jesus was not afraid of death. How does this link with John 10:17–18? (N.B. Some see Jesus as afraid to die because of his prayer in Gethsemane. Others see it that Jesus wished not to die in the garden [cf. Matt. 26:38; Heb. 5:7] but on the cross only.)
2. In the light of the much used Psalm 16 (Acts 2:25–28; 13:35ff.), what was the state of Christ’s mind and will as

he 'gave up his spirit'? What is meant by such a statement in the light of John 10:17-18?

3. What value does this committal by Christ of his spirit to the Father have for us today? How does John 11:25 link with it? What comfort can we give to others through this last word of Jesus?