

THE WORD OF COMFORT

"Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home." John 19:25-27.

The first word that Christ spoke from the cross on Calvary was a prayer for His enemies: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." The second word was an answer to prayer: "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." This third word was spoken to Mary, His mother, and to John, His beloved disciple: "Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother!"

Christ did not die unlamented. There were those present at the cross who cared. In this group were four women: Mary, the mother of the Lord Jesus; her sister, Salome, the wife of Zebedee and the mother of James and John; Mary, the wife (or widow) of Cleophas; and Mary Magdalene. John, the beloved disciple, was there also. After the crowd had begun to disperse, these five, who were nearest Him in loyalty and devotion, stood near the cross in silent sympathy.

God had showed Mary a signal honor when He selected her to give birth to the Saviour. When the angel appeared to Mary and announced that she would give birth to the Saviour, he made it a point to tell her that she was being honored. He said, "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women" (Luke 1:28).

Now, when they were crucifying her Son, Mary was present. Despite the horror of it all, she could not stay away. Her love for Him compelled her to stand by. She saw the rough soldiers drive the spikes through His hands and feet, and there was not a thing that she could do about it. No mother is ever called upon to bear a more heart-breaking experience than to see her son die. But in Mary's case there were many attendant circumstances that accentuated her grief. Christ Jesus was only approximately thirty-three years of age and in perfect health. His was not a natural death. He was being murdered in a most heartless manner. Although He was innocent of any wrongdoing, He was dying the death of a criminal. Mary was past fifty years of age, and under normal conditions she could have expected Christ Jesus to live to lay her away in the grave. There, before her eyes He hung, but she was helpless. Gladly she would have taken His place, if she could have. She could see the blood flowing from His wounds, but she dared not try to stop it. Although His mouth was parched and He was burning with fever, she dared not try to give Him as much as a drop of water. Bereft of hope, baffled and paralyzed by the strange scene, yet bound to the Dying One with the golden chain of love, there Mary stands. Try to read the thoughts of her mind and the emotions of her heart. The One Who was agonizing there on the cross was her Son. She it was who first planted kisses on that brow which at that time was crowned with thorns. She it was who guided those

hands and feet in their first infantile movements. No mother ever suffered as Mary did. Regardless of the age to which a man lives, he is always her baby to his mother. This was just as true in the case of Mary as any other. Her memory went back to His childhood days in Bethlehem and Egypt. These arms now spread upon the cross used to cling about her neck in perfect infant love. These hands and feet now pierced and held by brutal nails were then little chubby things upon which she looked with fondest wonder. He was her oldest son, and that made the tie the stronger, for between such there is usually the extraordinary comradeship of love. In her widowhood she had leaned much upon His strength. Now, while standing there by the cross, her heart must have been stirred to its very depths. But, no matter what her feelings, she did not faint, go into hysterics, or sink to the ground in her grief, but stood there bravely, calmly and lovingly watching the Son of God as He died.

Her attitude and action were unique. In all the annals of the history of the human race there is no parallel. What transcendent courage and marvelous fortitude she displayed as she repressed her grief and stood there silent! Bound to Christ by the golden chains of love, Mary stood there loyally by the cross. Where else could she have stood in that dread hour? A real mother never forsakes her son, even when he goes down into the valley of shadows.

"Beside the cross in tears
The woeful mother stood,
Bent 'neath the weight of years,
And viewed His flowing blood;
Her mind with grief was torn,
Her strength was ebbing fast,
And through her heart forlorn
The sword of anguish passed."

In addition to His mother, Christ's most congenial and intimate friend and disciple, John, was a witness of the solemn scene. John was the only one of the disciples who had remained faithful through it all, regardless of the personal risks that were involved. So, in His hour of approaching death Christ had with Him the two who were nearest and dearest to Him of all the people on earth, namely, His mother and His beloved disciple. In standing by the cross of Christ they manifested great fortitude, strong affection and genuine sympathy. Think of the sufferings they had to witness, and the spectacle they had to see. Think of the public scorn and ridicule to which they were exposed. Remember that their very lives were in jeopardy. They stood by Him in the hour of His greatest trial and sufferings, and when the others had left Him. They were helpless, but they went as far as possible. Because of their love for Him, they did all they could. After His disciples had deserted Him, His friends had forsaken Him, His nation had rejected Him and His enemies had cried out for His blood, His mother, John and three others stood there at the foot of the cross.

We are impressed by the thoughtfulness of the Saviour while He was racked by the most agonizing pain of body, mind and spirit. Some of us think very little about others under any circumstances. But, the thoughts of Christ were not upon Himself, even in His darkest

hour. Think of the physical agony of the cross -- the strained and fixed position of the body: the outstretched arms nailed through the sensitive nerves of the hands; the lacerated wounds of the back and the hands and the feet now inflamed and burning beneath the pitiless sun; the veins and arteries swelling and throbbing, causing the most agonizing torture in the brain; the burning sun and the dry hot wind causing an intolerable and maddening thirst. In spite of all that, Christ's thoughts were not centered upon His torn body, tortured mind or darkened spirit. Instead, He thought of those who were standing by His cross, and particularly His mother and His beloved disciple.

In the closing moments of His earthly life Christ sought to bring comfort and provision for those whom He loved so dearly. Christ singled out Mary and John for His final bequest and word of comfort. He did not call their names, perhaps in order to protect them from the angry mob. But Mary and John understood that He gave them that which should be theirs for the rest of their earthly days. When He asked Mary to look at her son, He was not drawing her attention to Himself, but He was deliberately directing it to John. "He saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son!" That was as if He were saying, "From now on, not I, but John, is your son." If her Son must be taken away, then another must be given to her in order that she may lavish her love upon him. The greatest earthly blessing that any man possesses is the love and devotion of some brave and good woman who is willing to stand by him through his difficulties.

Christ knew how much Mary was suffering, and how lonely she would be when He was gone. Just as He had arranged for a heavenly home for the penitent robber, so He was going to provide for His mother a home and tender care as long as she would need them, or until she would come to that eternal home not made with hands, which He was purchasing for her with His own precious blood. Christ had supported her until the end of His earthly ministry. Then, on the cross, He showed His love and concern for her welfare by providing a home for her in placing her in the care of John. Christ did not believe that service for others could atone for the neglect of a parent. Therefore, in providing for His mother, He was simply doing the duty that was closest to Him. He knew that she had to have a place to live and food to eat. But in arranging for her to have a home in the house of John, Christ was doing more than merely seeing to it that she should have shelter, raiment and food. He was providing for her a home. Home is more than a place to live; it is a place in which we love and are loved. Christ knew that Mary would feel more at home in the house of John than anywhere else, and that John would understand her and sympathize with her more than others would. It is thought that John was unmarried, and for that reason Mary would not have felt herself to be such a burden in his home.

Our Lord had always loved, honored and provided for His mother. He provided for her during the years when He labored in the carpenter's shop. His love was never more tender and compassionate than when He was on the cross, so there He provided for the closing years of His mother's life. In doing so, He set a wonderful example for all in this matter of honoring parents. They are our best friends. We ought to show them our affection while there is time and opportunity for us to do so.

As Mary was cared for, so John was given his duty to perform. Christ appointed John as the guardian or protector of His own beloved mother, the one who was the dearest of all to Him. To John was given the high privilege and opportunity to care for Mary in Christ's stead. What an honor was thus conferred upon him! John had the privilege of taking the place of his Lord in the service of one whom He loved so dearly. In one sense this privilege was unique. It was as if Christ had said, "It is your assignment, John, to be a substitute son. It is your task, in view of My sacrifice, to be a comfort and a stay to her." There is never a day in which we cannot represent our Lord, and do something for Him by helping somebody whom He loves.

An assignment from the cross meant much to John, so he proved himself to be faithful to his task. He was substituting for the Substitute. That was John's mission. Nobody ever had a more glorious mission on earth. Tradition tells us that John took Mary to his home and cared for her for some dozen years or until she died.

Mary had the capacity to give to her new son that affection which he needed. She found life rich and full in fellowship with John. During those years he undoubtedly got many interesting touches concerning Christ's life from Mary, for there are numerous intimate things that he mentions that the other writers omitted.