

THE CRY OF ANGUISH

"And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Matthew 27:46.

Never shall I forget the impressions which I received while standing and gazing on that skull-shaped hill outside the city of Jerusalem where our Saviour died on the cross. That experience has caused me to meditate much on the statements which He made while hanging on that cross. Truly, it is an inestimable blessing to meditate on the seven sayings of our suffering Saviour, Who came from eternity into time that He might save His people from their sins. The first three -- the word of forgiveness, the word of assurance and the word of comfort -- had to do with His fellow-men who were in need. After He had prayed for His enemies, given the robber the assurance of salvation, and instructed John to care for His mother, the scene changed and darkness came over them.

While no pen can describe and no human tongue can express what Christ suffered on the cross, it will be helpful for us to think about His cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Thus He addressed the Infinite by a name that He had never used in speaking to Him, and never used again. These matchless words must be approached with great reverence, for the place whereon we stand is holy ground.

This cry of Christ stirs my soul more than any of the utterances from the cross. More than either of the other sayings, it expresses the intense suffering which Christ bore for me upon the cross. It is the most agonizing prayer that was ever uttered. To be forsaken of God is the most terrible experience that can come to anybody. Just to think that Christ went through such an experience for me stirs my soul to the very depths. Those lips, into which grace had been poured and from which gracious words had flowed, had become the parched lips of a lonely sufferer crying, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" So far as the record goes, this is the only question that Christ ever asked God the Father during His entire earthly ministry. He always accepted God's will for Him without question. He never doubted that the Father's plan for Him was best. Never again did He utter the cry, "Why?"

This cry makes Christ our Brother in mystery. There is a "why" in every life. Some have stood at the side of an empty cradle and said, "Why?" Others with blasted hopes, blighted friendships and broken vows have said, "Why?" The Sunday after Dr. Joseph Parker, pastor of the City Temple in London, had buried his beautiful wife, his congregation wondered what text he would use for his sermon. He chose the one before us and said, "I thank God there was a 'why' in the Saviour's life." Yes, and such a fact brings comfort amid our loneliness and desolation.

Our Lord was then in the darkest part of His way. He had trodden the winepress for hours, and His work was almost finished. He had reached the culminating point of His anguish. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" was His dolorous lament from the lowest pit of misery. I do not think that the records of time, or even of eternity, contain a sentence more full of anguish.

Christ suffered so much from His enemies. He suffered in various parts of His body. His head was crowned with thorns and smitten with the reed. They smote Him in the face, and He gave His cheeks to them that plucked out the hair. He said, "I hid not my face from shame and spitting." He carried the heavy cross on His shoulders. He said, "I gave my back to the smiters." He remarked, "They pierced my hands and my feet." A soldier thrust a spear into His side. He suffered at the hands of all sorts of men. He suffered much from Satan.

It was no new experience for Christ to be forsaken by men. Throughout His life He had travelled a lonely road. When He began His public ministry the members of His own family turned away from Him. So did His fellow-citizens in Nazareth. Many who would have made Him king forsook Him and fled. Through its official leadership His nation rejected Him. At last, in His most trying hours, the companions of His own choosing failed Him and left Him to His fate. But through all of this cruel treatment, which harrowed His sensitive spirit sorely, He did not utter a complaint. When those who were passing by wagged their heads, Christ spoke not a word. When the chief priests mocked Him, He did not murmur. He had been given into the hands of men. They had done their worst, and God had not interfered. Earth had insulted Him, and heaven had not made any reply. In every such instance He always turned to the tender and healing fellowship with His heavenly Father.

"Forsaken" is a word so appalling and tragic in its meaning to a sensitive soul that words fail to describe it. We seem to hear the moan of a broken heart within it. To forsake means to leave in a lurch, or to leave behind in any state or place. What calamities are conjured up in this word -- a man forsaken by his friends, a wife forsaken by her husband, a husband forsaken by his wife, or a child forsaken by his or her parents! To be forsaken of God would be the most terrible calamity that could befall a person. As the word "forsaken" left the lips of Christ it conveyed the idea of desertion. What a term to come from One Who was bathed in the sunshine of His loving Father's presence! The nails in His flesh, the insults of His enemies, the cruelty of men and the shame of the cross did not cause Him anything like the grief Christ experienced when He was forsaken by the Father. The hiding of God's face from Him was the most bitter ingredient of that cup which the Father had given the Redeemer to drink. As the concentrated wrath of heaven descended upon Him Who was bearing the sins of men, He cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Surely this cry should melt the hardest heart!

That desertion was real, for God did forsake Christ. It was no fancy or delirium of mind, caused by His weakness of body, the heat of the fever, the depression of His spirit or the near approach of death, that led Christ to imagine what was not a fact. He endured all of the tortures of His body in silence, but when it came to being forsaken of God He was cut to the very quick and exclaimed, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" His fellowship with the Father had always been the highest, deepest and fullest, so what must the loss of it have been?

Why was our Saviour forsaken of God? The answer to that question is as close as you are to yourself. You are the answer. I am the answer. The reason why Christ was forsaken of God lies in you and in me. We are the cause. He stood in our stead. He took our place. Instead of you and me suffering the torments of hell, Christ suffered them in our place. Instead of you and me hanging on the cross, Christ was suspended there in our place. Instead of you and me being forsaken by God, Christ was forsaken by Him. Let this truth burn into your soul: Christ was forsaken that you and I might never be forsaken. "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." He had no sin of His own, but He was bearing our sins in His body on the tree. In His desolation we find our reconciliation. In His agony we find our atonement. In His separation from God we find our nearness to Him.

"There was none other good enough
To pay the price of sin,
He only could unlock the gate of heaven
And let us in.
We may not know, we cannot tell
What pains He had to bear,
But we believe it was for us,
He hung and suffered there."

Exactly at noon that day, something extraordinary happened. The sun slowly began to withdraw its beams and darkness spread a funeral pall over all the world. We may easily surmise how terror took hold of all creation, perhaps the animals being filled with consternation and the birds returning to their nests. Some of the people began to be so filled with terror and terrible forebodings that they left Calvary and went back to Jerusalem, wringing their hands and beating their breasts, as if regretting what was taking place. No wonder that the glorious sun hid its face in darkness and refused to shine upon the Son of God when He was dying for the sons of men. From the sixth hour until the ninth there was darkness over the face of the earth. That was a darkness which no science can explain. It was not the darkness of night, for it came on at twelve o'clock and lasted until three. Nor was it the darkness of an eclipse, for the moon was at its full. It was nature's great expostulation and protest against the crucifixion of its Maker and our Saviour and Lord.

"Well might the sun in darkness hide,
And shut His glories in,
When He, the mighty Maker, died
For man the creature's sin."

This period of darkness from the sixth hour until the ninth seems to have been a period of silence. But at the ninth hour, cringing from the thought of becoming sin, Christ broke the silence with a sudden and loud cry of desolation: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He meant for these words to ring out over the thronging crowds around the cross so that as many as possible

could hear them. Why hast Thou left Me to bear this terrible load alone? There has never been a cry from earth comparable to that lonely one from the cross. "Why hast thou forsaken me?" Why hast thou left Me helpless in the midst of hostile circumstances? That was a cry of desolation, separation and expiation.

This abandonment by God was the penalty for our sins. The penalty upon sin is death, or spiritual separation from God. This, as tasted by Christ, was the utmost price of the world's redemption. If any man thinks lightly of sin, or thinks that sin can be remedied by some light, cheap method, let him hear the echo of that cry from Calvary: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" That cry is the measure of God's wrath towards sin; it is the measure of God's love for man; and the measure of Christ's work for our redemption. But there is great comfort in the knowledge that upon the cross Christ passed through utter desolation, experienced the utmost penalty of sin, which is separation from God, in order that you and I might never despair, that we might never be forsaken. How many seem content to live a lifetime in a condition of alienation from God, which our Lord could not endure for even a few hours!