

THE SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS

THERE is something very solemn about the words of a dying man. The speaker departs and is heard no more. The actor in one of life's multitudinous dramas has played his role, has passed away from our sight, and the curtain has fallen. No matter how much loved or respected, he is soon forgotten, and new actors become centres of attention. If occasionally "one who is dead yet speaketh," the echo of his voice reaches the ear but faintly, and is soon lost amid the Babel of other voices which in their turn will die away. Impressive therefore are the echoes that never die—the voices that float down to us out of the dead Past, that reach us clear and bell-like across the ages and with living power record themselves indelibly within our hearts.

Such are the words of our Lord Jesus on the cross. Epitomizing in a few phrases that wonderful life, they bear a significance that only such a life can lend to such a death. So we stand and listen as if we had heard naught before worth listening to, or should hear naught again worthy to command our attention. In them all the revelation of God's love seems pent up and breaking forth; and having listened, with bowed heads we exclaim: "Truly this was the Son of God."

Whatever of originality this paper may possess consists in the arrangement of these memorable words, which attest the divine character of the records from which the words are drawn.

One of the great puzzles of the Gospels is found in their omissions. It must seem a bewildering thing to the casual reader, unacquainted with their purpose, that the writers could have been led by any concatenation of circumstances whatever, to leave out some of the wonderful events

that embellish the beautiful record. He may for this reason even be temporarily tempted to doubt the genuineness of the story. If, however, they can be pieced together in such a way that they seem exactly to dovetail into one another, the impress of a divine seal seems at once to stamp the whole with the assertion of Truth.

The arrangement referred to is the following:

A.	B.
“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”	“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”
C.	D.
“Woman, behold thy son;” (To the disciple)	“I thirst.”
“Behold thy mother.”	
E.	F.
“To-day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise.”	“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”
G.	
“IT IS FINISHED.”	

The right-hand column comprises utterances with regard to the Lord Himself; the left column gives utterances with regard to others; and the final saying, “It is finished,” is impersonal, and links harmoniously with each group. The division into statements as to others and as to Himself is so obvious that it has often been remarked upon. The arrangement of the pairs in each column, however, affords a further classification that becomes fruitful of thought.

Two things are to be noted. The first pair has to do with the attitude of God in heaven towards those on earth. The second pair concerns the attitude of those on earth to things on earth. The third pair relates those on earth to a future with God. So the arrangement has all the interest of an acrostic. It justifies itself both perpendicularly and horizontally; and the “IT IS FINISHED” in the middle places its seal of perfection on each series. In the Greek, “It is finished,” and “It is perfected,” are very much alike; this may serve to remind us how divinely perfect are all the consummations of God.

Then again, there are wonderful links between each member of each pair, still further attesting the unity and glory of the divine record—internal harmonies that seem like the interplay of soft lights on Urim and Thummim, adorning the breastplate of our Great High Priest.

Let us then study this arrangement in detail, and may God's blessing attend upon it.

First Pair.

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

These two utterances of our Lord enshrine an amazing revelation of God as both Light and Love. The love however, seems peculiarly misdirected toward the *wicked*, and the judgment toward the *just*. This also has been one of the mysteries of all time, and without God and Christ it is unfathomable. Even the Omniscient Sufferer seems amazed, for He asks in no mere rhetorical way, but out of the depths of the darkness of night: "*Why?*" Again, Truth seems suffering on the scaffold, and Wrong is regnant! With a divine interpreter, however, for the first time a clear light illumines the mystery, and we are given a conception of God that so far transcends anything that had ever entered the mind of man, that its transcendent glory blackens the brightest splendor of all earth's cults and philosophies. Oh, who could ever have even *dreamed* this: God is *so* holy that He can forsake His Son when He interposes between the demands of righteousness and *sinful man*! And He is *so* gracious that He can forgive the darkest infamy that earth has ever witnessed! Here are seeming contradictions, perplexing and astounding, yet, at the same time, dissolving the deepest perplexity and bringing us to our knees, crying, "Holy, holy, holy! Only Thou art holy!"

Let us first study them with a view to a clearer vision of the Man who speaks the words, and then pass on to their apocalyptic glories, for it is through this Man alone that we can see God.

The "Father" of the first member is the "God" of the second member. Of this there can be no question. It is partly for the reason that He had Himself coupled them together that He was put to death—His enemies having accused Him of blasphemy on that very account.

Is it not a wonderful thing that He can say "Father" from that cross? In the intimate way in which He uses the name, a new revelation of God to man is given us; and the connection in which it is used bespeaks the character of both Son and Father in a striking way. History records that men crucified were accustomed to pour imprecations and curses on those who subjected them to that ignominious and dreadful torture. Nor can we wonder at it. What right have fellow-sinners to inflict such sufferings on another? But oh, how different is He who pleads, "*Father*, forgive them!" What a profound gulf separates Him from the rest of the human race! What record is there in earth or heaven of anything similar before the advent of this Princely Man? It is the marvelous character of that love for His enemies that renders so easily credible that unique claim of perfection that He alone of all men has advanced with compelling dignity, and which His cross of suffering has so regally established!

"They know not what they do," is equally wonderful, though it is usually passed over with little comment. Let us put them alongside each other for the sake of a better understanding.

In the words, "Father, forgive," the Lord's glance is heavenward into that abode where the peace of God reigneth. In the words, "They know not what they do," His glance is hellward, into a sea of sin foaming out its bitterness and shame around the cross. In the one—"Father, forgive"—He discloses the ineffable and unfathomable love of the Father. In the other—"They know not what they do,"—He looks into the caldron of human passion and hatred. Such sudden transitions tend to unsettle the judgment. The darkness seems blacker, the light more

dazzling, because of the contrast: the love the more wonderful, the hate the more loathsome. So the calm utterance, "They know not what they do," is marvelous in its dispassion.

But apart from any contrast, how wicked are the perpetrators of that judicial murder! Connected even with Jerusalem's murderous past, where fanaticism had raved through the streets, and where prophets of bygone days had been cruelly done to death, how heinous is this crime of crimes! Here was the HEIR OF ALL THE AGES, and in the name of God and of patriotism, they were killing Him and He is looking down on it all from these serene heights of moral elevation where God had not as yet disclosed Himself in such lofty grandeur, and He drains the bitter cup which they, with the generations of the past and the future, had been filling. He knows, as only the innocent and the holy can know, all the depths of their guilt. Presently the calm will be gone; and there will be wrung from Him that agonized cry sounding across the fathomless gulfs of time, deep calling unto deep: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me!" Yet agony does not dim the eyes of this patient Sufferer. He explores, searches the waste and arid waters of their passion until, with the yearning of a heart that still is Love, he pleads in their behalf:

"FATHER, THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO."

Now, for another comparison, place this first member of the pair alongside the second:

"My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me!"

If in the first we view the glory in grace of the Father and the Son, what an appalling cloud now settles over that glory: "Forgive *them*: Forsake *Me!*" What a gulf lies between the two: God's goodness on the one hand; and His apparent indifference to the cry of distress on the other!

Is then Calvary to be but a tragical consummation to all the past mysteries of suffering? What says the patient Sufferer when He comes forth from the cloud and the storm—He who of all men (who dare dispute it?) seemed closest to that God? Oh, He finds One into whose hands He can still commend His spirit. *His* faith in God has stood the test. The filial confidence of that first “Father” is again to ring out in words that have been the *irenicon* of dying lips for the past nineteen centuries. So we are prepared to catch the music of other words, “Thou art holy, O Thou who inhabitest the praises of Israel”—applying to Him who suffered in the suffering of that Son upon that cross. Who but Him who bore the cross shall ever know the full significance of those words, “*The Father gave the Son?*” That cloud of mystery is now illumined by the rays of divine and infinite tenderness, and over the black gulfs of sin and man’s hatred glows the amazing and blessed assurance that

“GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS
ONLY BEGOTTEN SON,”

and the light of another and heavenly morning shines upon the world.

So each member of the first pair of utterances blends with the other to assure us that the Almighty, who is indeed the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, can do no wrong.

Second Pair.

“Woman, behold thy Son;”

(To the disciple)

“Behold thy mother.”

“I thirst.”

Both members of this pair are found only in John’s Gospel, and, as we have already said, they have to do with the earth only. Moreover, the second member is addressed to no one, and in this respect is unique. The connection between the members is not at first apparent. They seem to throw no light upon one another.

In a certain sense they are linked together by their comparative insignificance. The issues involved are temporal, not eternal. Compared with the others they seem of small import, having to do with every-day, ordinary things. Yet there is a remarkable beauty even in this very fact. Our Lord is working out the eternal redemption of a race; He is establishing an everlasting foundation on which God may meet the sinner; He is vindicating a maligned God in His ways with man. Yet, in spite of all this, He forgets not those comparatively little duties that at such a crisis might, by their very insignificance, be neglected or overlooked. This indeed is a high tribute to Him. He who spreads out the heavens and hung the earth over nothing, who tosses mighty Antares of four hundred million miles diameter through space, and guides the multitudinous orbs of the Milky Way, also fashions the lovely rose and the lowly lily of the valley. And this second revelation in Holy Scripture assures us that He who fills heaven with the songs of myriads upon myriads of the redeemed, will yet not forget the earthly needs of those dependent on Him.

Many connect the "I thirst," with the 69th psalm: "They gave me also gall for my meat, and in my thirst they gave Me vinegar to drink. I looked for some to take pity, *and there was none.*"

It is not the Mother who once lavished on Him all a mother's tenderness, nor the beloved disciple who used to lean on His bosom, who supplies the need, but an alien, an enemy, perfunctorily fills this office, offering Him the vinegar-soaked sponge. Truly, "there was none to take pity." Is not this indeed the key to the hopeless, indirect plea, "I thirst?" Is not this a perfect picture of friendlessness and hopelessness?

But if these words epitomize the thought of the second member, how beautifully do they offset His own devoted interest in the welfare of His mother. He craves for Himself but the smallest of home blessings, a cup of cold

water, while for her He provides according to the filial devotion of a son for his mother. "Having loved His own, which were in the world, He loved them unto the end," "perfectly," as the latter phrase might be translated.

Third Pair.

"To-day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise."	"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."
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Both numbers of this pair are found only in Luke's Gospel. They point those on earth to a blessed, heavenly future; one giving the *place*, and the other the *Person* who is the centre of that place. Between the words and their fulfilment the river of death rolls its dark waters, but across those waters we behold the Paradise of God, and the Father Himself ready to welcome the Son with His strange companion—the One who has won life eternal, and the other who had forfeited even this transient life, and who said, "We indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds, but this Man hath done nothing amiss."

What a calm assurance breathes through each member of this pair: "To-day shalt thou be with Me;" "I with the Father"—in Paradise, where flows the river of water of life, where grows the tree of life with its healing leaves; where glows in all the radiance of glory the throne now established forever: "The glory of God doth lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof."

Such a consummation, such a gospel of glory is here preached as no Spurgeon, no Chalmers, no Robert Hall can find eloquence properly to portray, and we can exclaim with our blessed Lord: IT IS FINISHED! Salvation has been blessedly accomplished, peace has been established, and grace reigns triumphant.

—F. C. GRANT.

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