



# The Seven Words of the Cross

Lenten Studies prepared by Jason A. Goroncy

# Prologue

Welcome to our Lenten Studies. It was sometime in the early 90s. I found myself sitting at a bus stop opposite the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne. I'd missed my bus. In fact, I'd missed all the buses, and dinner. It was now late. 'The book made me do it'. In fact, it was only a few chapters from *Christ's Cross Over Man's Abyss*.<sup>1</sup> The subject of those chapters has haunted me for over twenty years.

But we must begin elsewhere ...

## What happened two thousand years ago?<sup>2</sup>

Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ died on the cross of Calvary. From the perspective of the Roman Empire, his death was just another execution, just another brutal demonstration of Roman authority and control, another sermon preaching to all that Rome rules. From the perspective of the religious leaders of the Jews, the death of Jesus Christ was the moment of victory. They had successfully manipulated Rome to eliminate the teacher from Nazareth, the greatest threat to their prestige and power. From the perspective of the disciples of Jesus, his death was a moment of profound horror and grief. Their master and friend, the one they believed would save them, and indeed the world, had fallen victim to the system. He hung on the cross like a criminal, an outcast, helpless and powerless. They ran for their lives.

Three days later, their tune began to change. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead not only thrilled their hearts, it blew their minds. It blew every circuit of their theological thought. In the light of the resurrection, the disciples saw something happening in Jesus Christ and in his death that was so huge, so vast, so deep, that it involved the whole cosmos. They saw the death of Jesus as the moment of all moments, the axis upon which human history itself turned, the point at which human existence was decisively altered. How could they even begin to explain what had happened in his death? They saw something that they could not comprehend, let alone talk about. It was too rich for words, too huge to speak. The New Testament is the record of their explosive joy and their struggle, their mammoth struggle to understand what happened in Jesus Christ.

Two thousand years later, we are still trying to get to grips with Jesus Christ, with who he is and what he accomplished in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. We are still trying to understand the meaning of his death. Why did he have to die? What happened in Jesus' death? What real difference does it make to us? What is the relevance of the death of Jesus Christ for us, for the human race, for human history? In what way is the death of Jesus Christ good news for us? How does his death help us? How can what happened to him be of any benefit to us?

The death of Jesus Christ is part of a seamless movement that begins in eternity with the Father, Son and Spirit and ends with the exaltation of the human race to the right hand of God the Father almighty in the ascension of the incarnate Son. If we are to understand why Jesus died, what happened in his death and what it means for us today, we have to go back to eternity and begin with the astonishing decision of Father, Son and Spirit to include us in their circle of shared life. For the reality that drives the coming of Jesus Christ and pushes him to the cross is the relentless and determined passion of the Father to have us as his beloved children. The first thing to be said about the death of Jesus Christ is that he died because God the Father almighty loves us with an everlasting, implacable and undaunted love, that refuses to allow us to perish.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Christ's Cross Over Man's Abyss* (Blackwood: New Creation, 1987). Chapters 9–12 will serve as the template for our Lenten Studies.

<sup>2</sup> This section is taken from C. Baxter Kruger, *Jesus and the Undoing of Adam* (Jackson: Perichoresis Press, 2007).

## The Fire in God's Belly

There are two truths that set apart the Christian vision of God from every other religion in history. The first is the doctrine of the Trinity. The second is the humility of God. In no other religion do we have a god who stoops, a god who comes down to enter into human history, who wants to be united with us, and who is prepared to suffer to accomplish such a union. The gods that human beings create in their imaginations are inevitably all-powerful deities who tower above us in their glory, gods who are indifferent, distant and removed from us, beyond us, who exist in eternal separation from human beings and manipulate us with their power. The Christian God is the exact opposite. From eternity, the Christian God desires to be united with us. From eternity the Christian God plans to stoop down to us and lift us up so that we can share in everything that he is and has. From eternity, the Christian God works to share his glory and fullness with us, to share his life and wholeness and goodness with human beings, to give us a place in the circle of divine life. The Christian God despises being untouchable, distant, removed. The plan from the beginning is that the fountain of divine life will flow into human existence and be shared with each of us. In Karl Barth's profound phrase, God does not want to be God without us – and God never has. Part of what John means when he tells us that Jesus Christ is the Word of God and that the Word became flesh is that there has never been a moment in all eternity when God wanted to be without us. God always planned to become flesh. It is God's eternal Word.<sup>3</sup>

Behind this vision of God stooping to enter into the closest possible relationship with human beings is the fact that God is Father, Son and Spirit. The Bible tells us that the Father *loves* the Son and that the Son *loves* the Father and that they share all things in the love and abounding *fellowship* of the Spirit. Nothing that could be said about God is deeper than this mutual love. Here we see the fundamental truth about God. God exists as a relationship of three persons in profound and endless love and acceptance and fellowship. Everything else to be said about God is a variation on this theme, a description of this relationship of Father, Son and Spirit. When we talk about the love of God, we are talking about the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit. When we talk about the holiness of God, we are trying to describe the wholeness and purity and integrity, the beauty of the fellowship of the Trinity. When we talk about the righteousness of God, we are talking about the rightness of their relationship. When we talk about the fullness of God or the blessedness of God, we are talking about the abounding and joyous life of the Father, Son and Spirit.

Fellowship is not an attribute of God. It is not something that may or may not happen on a given day. God *exists* in fellowship. God *is* fellowship. To believe in the Trinity means that we believe that God is a relational being, and always has been and always will be. The doctrine of the Trinity means that relationship, that fellowship, that togetherness and sharing, that self-giving, that other-centeredness are not afterthoughts with God, but the deepest truth about the being of God. When Christianity says 'God', it says relationship. It says self-giving love expressing itself in abounding fellowship and joyous and untold unity. When Christianity says 'God', it does not say self-centered. It does not say removed, distant, detached, indifferent, austere. It does not say lonely or sad or bored or in need. The confession of the Christian church is that God is Father, Son and Spirit. And this relationship, this abounding and joyous fellowship, is the womb of the universe and of humanity within it.

Before the creation of the world, the Father, Son and Spirit made the astounding decision that they would open their life and glory, the circle of their abounding fellowship and joy, and give human beings a real and abiding place within it. This is not an afterthought. This is the first thought. The universe, our solar system, the earth, and humanity are not eternal. There was a time when they were 'not'. There was a time when there was nothing but the circle of the Holy Trinity. The world was not here and humanity had no being, and no possibility of existence at all. Creation, the birth and existence of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2* (ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance; trans. G.T. Thompson and T.F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 207.

universe, of the earth and all its inhabitants, from the greatest to the lowest, from the invisible to the most obvious, was the act of the Triune God. Paul tells us that this creative activity followed a prior decision. Creation was the fruit of purpose, the outgrowth of a heart willing and determined to accomplish a definite goal. Behind creation, figuring as the driving force of all divine activity, as the one thought on the forefront of the divine mind and the preoccupation of the heart of God, was the decision to give human beings a place in the circle of life shared by Father, Son and Spirit.

Before the blueprints for creation were drawn up, the Father, Son and Spirit set their heart and abounding philanthropy upon us. In sheer grace, the Triune God decided not to hoard the Trinitarian life and glory, but to share it with us, to *lavish* it upon us. They determined to give us a share in their eternal life and being and fellowship. The heart of the Father, Son and Spirit named us and loved us from eternity and determined to give us a place in the divine family and a share in its rich and overflowing life.

Why this is so, why God is this way, why the Father, Son and Spirit set the fullness of their love and lavish grace upon us, and determined such a glorious destiny for us, can only be answered by peering into the mutual love of the Father and Son and Spirit. For in one way or another, the existence of everything, not least every human being, finds its purpose in the deep and abiding love of the Triune God. That circle of love, that circle of intimacy and togetherness and fellowship, that circle of purity and mutual delight and eternal wholeness, is the womb of all divine thought and activity.

The thought of sharing with others – the idea of giving, of including, of blessing – and the unrelenting determination that it would be so at all costs, flows directly out of the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit. Such love, such giving, such lavish and excessive philanthropy, such other-centeredness and self-effacing and sacrificial care, are not unnatural for God. It is the way God *is* as Father, Son and Spirit. It is the truest truth about God, the deepest part of the well of divine being. But why the Triune God would turn such giving and care and lavish and determined love upon us, is another question. Such an astonishing act is consistent, perfectly consistent with the being of God as Trinity, but it is not necessary. Such self-effacing and sacrificial care, such excessive philanthropy and blessing, such unswerving and fiery devotion, are all natural for God who exists in relationship, but there is no compelling reason that they should be directed toward us. Before such love, we can only stand amazed, astonished and thrilled.

This decision flowing out of the being and character of God, this decision to share all that the Father, Son and Spirit are and have together with us, and the relentless determination that it would be so, is the true and proper context for the death of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ died because the Father, Son and Spirit absolutely refused to go back on their desire for us. ‘For God *so loved* the world’, Jesus says, ‘that he gave his only Son ...’ (John 3:16). Before creation, the Triune God decided that the human race would be included in the Trinitarian circle of life and fullness and glory and joy. And with that decision came a fire in God’s belly that it would be so no matter what it cost. The Lamb was slain before the foundation of the world!

What was God’s reaction when Adam fell into sin? What did God do when the human race and creation were plunged into ruin and began lapsing into nothingness? Did God throw up his hands and walk away disgusted? Did he say to himself, ‘I knew they would do this, they deserve to perish, let them get what they deserve?’ Did God explode with anger at Adam and Eve for the audacity of disobedience to him? Did he threaten vengeance? Did his blood begin to boil with plans of punishment and retribution? No. The fall of Adam and Eve was met by the eternal Word of God. The disaster of Adam’s sin, the chaos and misery, the brokenness and bondage of Adam’s rebellion was met with an immediate and stout and intolerable divine NO! I did not create *you* to perish. I did not create *you* to flounder in misery, to live in such appalling pain and brokenness and heartache and destitution. I created *you* for life, to share in my life and glory, to participate in the fullness and joy, the free-flowing fellowship and goodness and wholeness that I share with my Son and Spirit. And I will have it no other

way. It *will* be so.

Over 40 times, John tells us in his gospel that Jesus Christ was sent by God the Father. John saw that the coming of Jesus Christ, that his death on the cross, flowed out of the endless love of the Father for us and out of his unyielding determination that his purpose for us would be fulfilled. The death of Jesus Christ is the revelation of the fact that the Father has never abandoned us, never forsaken us, that he refuses to go back on his dream to include us in the circle of life. Jesus' death is part of the fulfilment of the eternal purpose of God, part of a seamless movement designed to lay hold of the human race, cleanse us of all alienation, and bring us home. For the Father will have it no other way.

### **The Fall of Adam and the Divine Dilemma**

The second thing to be said about the death of Jesus Christ is that the only way to get from the Fall of Adam and Eve to the right hand of God the Father almighty is through death. The Fall was such a disaster that the only way to heal the human race was by putting the human race to death and recreating it in resurrection.

As a child, many of us were taught the catechism's definition of sin: 'What is Sin? Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God'. This is a typically legal understanding of sin as violation of the law of God. But sin is far more profound than breaking the law, either by failure to do what we should or by doing what we should not do. The catechism, and the whole legal orientation of Western theology, confuses the root with the fruit. The problem introduced by the Fall of Adam was not simply that humanity began breaking the rules. The problem was that humanity became diseased. The disease is the root problem.

Sin is a disease, a spiritual cancer that destroys our humanity and our existence. God's forgiveness is not about balancing a ledger. Forgiveness is about healing, about transforming, converting and recreating our humanity. Sin is about corruption, about disease, about a deep and pervasive alienation of our very beings. To be sure, all manner of evil and wrongdoing come forth from sin, but these are symptoms of the deeper, more profound disease. If God's purpose to lift us up into union with himself, to give us a place in the circle of the Trinitarian life, is going to be fulfilled, the disease has to be healed, the cancer has to be excised out of our humanity. That is the dilemma that the love of the Father, Son and Spirit faced in the Fall of Adam. There has to be a radical conversion of the flesh. And it all has to happen in such a way that God does not lose us in the process.

To be alive, to breathe, to exist is one thing; it is quite another to be filled with overflowing and abounding life. Adam and Eve were both alive and filled, and both their existence and their abounding life came from God. The freedom of Adam and Eve to love and be loved, to know and be known, to give and share, to laugh and play, was not a freedom they possessed in themselves. The freedom to go out of themselves and embrace one another, to give themselves, to expose themselves and be known, the freedom to play, was the fruit of something else. Freedom belongs to the Father, Son and Spirit. Adam and Eve participated in the freedom of God to love. But how did that happen? How did they share in God's freedom? How did God's freedom to know and be known, God's freedom for fellowship get from God into Adam and Eve? The answer, to borrow a statement from Jesus, is that Adam and Eve *knew* the truth, and it was by *knowing* the truth that they experienced God's freedom. Moreover, in living out that freedom they experienced fellowship and fellowship filled their 'existence' with 'abounding life'.

Adam and Eve belonged to God. They were the prized creation and the objects of God's personal delight and love and breathtaking blessing. Knowing who they were, knowing that they belonged to God, knowing that God delighted in them, did not fill them with anxiety or dread; it bathed their insides with bonifide peace and deep and abiding security. Knowing God's delight in them filled them

with assurance. That assurance and peace and security in turn generated freedom to go out of themselves and embrace one another, freedom to give and receive, freedom to expose themselves and be known. They were not ashamed of themselves nor were they fearful. They were baptised with assurance. That baptism with assurance kindled freedom to know and be known; freedom to know and be known gave birth to fellowship; and fellowship transformed their 'existence' into 'abounding life'. Fellowship is the dynamic that translated their existence into a great dance. Assurance is the dynamic that generated fellowship. And knowing the truth is the dynamic that created assurance.

Now let us turn that picture on its head. Think of a five-year-old girl who believes that there is a monster in the wardrobe. What happens to the little girl's insides when she believes the monster is real? For her to 'believe in' the monster is to have a razor slice through her soul. It is to be baptised, not with assurance, but with fear, and that baptism of fear and anxiety and dread shuts down her freedom to play, to laugh, to fellowship, to walk out of her room and engage the world. A baptism very much like this happened to Adam and Eve.

The actual Fall came before they ate the fruit. They fell when they stopped believing the truth and believed the lie of the serpent. In that moment, the razor cut through their souls, assurance was shredded, and anxiety infiltrated the scene of human history. Eating the fruit itself was the first fruit, the first response to the great anxiety that swept into their hearts when they believed the lie. The serpent convinced them that God was holding out on them, that God was not giving them everything they should have, that they were not yet everything that they could be. Adam and Eve believed the serpent. What happened to Adam and Eve's assurance when they believed that lie? What happened to their security and peace when they believed that God was holding out on them, that they were not everything that they could be, that they were not yet in the real glory? Their peace and assurance and security were run through the paper shredder and their souls were baptised with the lethal dose of anxiety and insecurity and guilt. Adam and Eve suddenly *knew* good and evil. When anxiety came in, what happened to Adam's freedom to go out of himself and embrace Eve? What happened to their freedom to give and to receive, to expose themselves and be known? What happened to their freedom for fellowship and their freedom to play? Anxiety and fear and insecurity kindle hiding, self-protection and self-centeredness, which obliterate freedom for fellowship.

Knowing the truth baptised Adam and Eve's souls with assurance; assurance created freedom to go out of themselves and know and be known; freedom to know and be known gave birth to fellowship; and fellowship filled their existence with the great dance of life. When Adam and Eve believed the lie, when they *knew* the lie, such knowledge shot fear running through their veins like lightning – and fear short-circuited their freedom to know and be known, which short-circuited fellowship, which short-circuited the great dance and its joy. And in the vacuum, loneliness and isolation and alienation rushed in, along with guilt and shame and grief, pain and sorrow and inexpressible angst. That seed of brokenness and estrangement soon flowered into anger and bitterness and depression, envy and jealousy and strife, gossip and slander and murder. A river of toxic waste began to flow from the evil one into Adam and Eve and out of Adam and Eve into all creation. Anxiety became the matrix of human existence.

Needless to say, Adam and Eve became different people. They still existed, they still breathed, but they no longer experienced anything close to abounding life. The lie of the evil one was an illusion, a figment of his own imagination, a legend, but it was an illusion that Adam and Eve believed to be the truth. Believing it decimated their insides and left their existence forever altered – gnarled and twisted and skewed beyond recognition. How do we even begin to describe the problem of sin? What words do we have to describe this state of human existence?

Worst of all was the fact that now the very presence of God filled them with dread. Adam and Eve hid in the bushes from God. Were they afraid of punishment? I think it was the love of God that they feared. It was the joy and fullness and freedom and goodness of God that scared them. For the love and joy and fullness of God now exposed their bankruptcy, their perversion, their nothingness and

misery, and they could not bear the pain of it all. And to this must be added the fact that this internal turmoil, this lethal dose and its horrible fruit, coloured the way Adam saw God. Adam projected his own brokenness onto God's face, tarring God with the brush of his own angst, thereby dooming himself to deeper and deeper misinterpretation of the very heart of God, whose presence already filled him with dread.

### Israel as the Womb of the Incarnation

Adam said 'No' to God; and God said 'No' to Adam's 'No'. God refused to alter his plan that we might share in his own Triune life. God is for *us* and therefore opposed – utterly, eternally and passionately opposed – to our destruction. That opposition, that fiery and passionate and determined 'No!' to the disaster of the Fall, is the proper understanding of the wrath of God. It is precisely because the Triune God has spoken an eternal 'Yes!' to the human race, a 'Yes!' to life and fullness and joy for us, that the Fall and its disaster is met with a stout and intolerable 'No! This is not acceptable. I did not create *you* for misery'. Therein the plan of reconciliation begins to unfold.

God called Abraham, and through Abraham established a nation, and with that nation God began a long and painful relationship. First, God gave the law through Moses to stop the bleeding, and to help the Israelites begin to understand that there was a serious problem. But the giving of the law was not even close to the main thing God was doing in Israel. In Israel God was drawing near to fallen Adamic existence.

Whereas Adam and Eve hid in the bushes from God, Israel was called into fellowship with God. Israel had to bear the unbearable. They were thrown into a real relationship, not with the law, but with God. On the one side, there was the Father, Son and Spirit and their fellowship and intimacy, their abounding life and joy and wholeness. On the other side, there was Israel, fallen, corrupt and estranged, alienated, broken and fearful. How could such opposites be thrown into real relationship?

Again and again, Israel bolted for the door and ran away. The goodness of God, the love and joy and glory of God, was too much to bear. Like Adam and Eve Israel tried to hide. They tried to create a religion to keep God away. They tried to be like the nations around them. But God would not let them go. The remarkable thing about Israel's history is that here we have a people from the sin-garled stock of Adam, a people fallen and estranged and scared out of their wits, thrown into the room with God Himself.

In Israel, the Word of God is already on the road to becoming flesh. For nothing less than an impossible union between God of God, on the one side, and fallen Israel on the other, is what was beginning to happen in Israel's history. For God was not merely revealing truths about himself to Israel; God was revealing *himself*.

The harrowing ordeal of God's relationship with fallen Israel produced two great things. First, it established a bridgehead inside the estranged mind of fallen humanity. The revelation of God was as a fire in the alienated mind of Israel, cutting into Israel's diseased thinking and being. The fruit of such conflict was the forging of new concepts and categories and ideas, such as covenant, faithfulness, atonement, mercy, community, which would become 'the essential furniture of our knowledge of God'.<sup>4</sup> Second, the proximity of the fullness of God to the brokenness of Israel, the connection between God of God and fallen Israel, created a stir which was to become the matrix of the incarnation itself. Israel's calling was not to obey certain truths about God; Israel was called into living relationship with God himself. And God would not allow Israel to sweep her brokenness under the carpet. There would be no hiding. The presence of God stirred up all manner of conflict with Israel. It brought the Fall of Adam to the surface and created the fight of fights. This conflict is the first form of atonement

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 18.



and reconciliation, the first flashes of death and resurrection, the first hints of the end and the new beginning of fallen Adamic existence. This conflict created by the unveiling of God himself to fallen Israel is the womb of the incarnation of the Son of God.

### **The Conversion of Adamic Existence in Jesus Christ**

To think of the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven, to think of him seated now and forever at the right hand of God the Father almighty, as the Creed says, and to think of the ascension in the context of the Fall of Adam and in the context of Israel's conflict with God, is to stand before the miracle of the work of Jesus Christ. The ascension means that now and forever a human being, a Jew, a son of Adam is face to face with the Father. Now and forever, one from the sin-gnarled stock of Adamic existence lives in fellowship, indeed in utter union, with God the Father, sharing all things with the Father in the abounding fellowship of the Spirit.

The right hand of God the Father almighty is the exact opposite of hiding in the bushes in the Garden of Eden. It is the exact opposite of Israel running from God. The ascension preaches to us that here in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, the Fall of Adam and Eve has been undone, Adamic existence has been thoroughly converted to God, fundamentally reordered into right relationship with God. Moreover, the ascension of Christ preaches that the conflict between God and Israel has been resolved into real and abiding reconciliation, and that the evil one with his enslaving darkness has been decisively defeated. Fellowship, not contradiction, now fills the covenant. Truth, not the illusion of the evil one, now dominates the relationship between God and human existence in Jesus Christ.

The Church has always confessed that Jesus Christ is God come in the flesh. He is fully divine and fully human, God of God and man of man. It is in thinking these two truths together that we come to the heart of the work of Jesus Christ. The sum and substance of the work of Christ is that the eternal Son of God became human and lived out his divine sonship inside our fallen Adamic existence, and in doing so not only converted fallen Adamic existence, but also forged a real and abiding relationship between God the Father and fallen humanity.

On the one side, there is the truth that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, the Father's beloved, who from all eternity has loved the Father with all of his heart, soul, mind and strength, and shared all things with him in the untold fellowship of the Spirit. The incarnation is not merely about some generic divine being becoming human. The Church confesses nothing of an abstract divinity, a 'lone ranger' god who dwells in isolation. The confession of the Church is that God is Father, Son and Spirit. It was not a god, but the *Son* of God, who became human. The incarnation, therefore, is the act of the Triune God, and it means nothing short of the earthing of the eternal Trinitarian fellowship. When the Son of God stepped across the divide and entered into human existence, he did not leave his Father or the Spirit behind. The incarnation means that the very life of the Trinity, the fellowship and camaraderie and togetherness, the fullness and joy and glory of the Father, Son and Spirit, and nothing less, set up shop inside human existence.

On the other side, there is the staggering truth that the Son of God became *flesh*, as John tells us. It is one thing to say that the Son of God became a human being; it is quite another to say that he became *flesh*. 'Flesh' locates the incarnation not only within human existence, but within the pale of fallen Adamic existence. It could not have been otherwise. Jesus' mission was to bring the *fallen* human race to the right hand of God the Father almighty. His mission was to reconcile *us* to God, to heal the breach, to undo the Fall and bring us to glory. The mind-boggling truth of the incarnation is that the Son of God stepped right into the stream of the Fall. He entered into the quagmire of human estrangement and alienation from God. We do not understand the incarnation until we see that the Son of God entered into fallen Adam's skin, and took upon himself Adam's estranged and alienated mind.



Both truths have to be held together or everything is lost. If Jesus Christ ceases to be the Father's beloved Son who lives in fellowship with the Father in the Spirit, then he has nothing to give to fallen humanity. Indeed, in that case he too would become just another person estranged from God. On the other hand, if the Son of God fails to penetrate the Fall, fails to enter into our brokenness and estrangement and perversion, then he may have all the blessings of God, but they do not reach *us*. Adamic existence remains untouched, unhealed, unsaved. The covenant relationship between God and Israel remains unfulfilled, and the human race remains in the illusion of the evil one – lost to God.

The paradox at the heart of Christianity is that the Son of God entered into fallen Adamic existence without ceasing to be the Son of God. He became Adam without ceasing to be the faithful Son of the Father. The life of the Trinity intersected the brokenness of fallen human existence. The face-to-face fellowship of the Father, Son and Spirit, the wholeness and rightness and togetherness of the Triune God, set up shop inside the brokenness and perversion and disorder of the Fall. How is this possible? How could the fellowship of the Trinity penetrate Adam's hiding? How could the togetherness and integrity of the Father, Son and Spirit enter into the brokenness and perversion of fallen Adamic existence? How could the one who loves the Father with all of his heart enter into the blindness and obstinacy of Israel? How could this 'most violent of all contradictions',<sup>5</sup> as Edward Irving put it, be possible?

The answer is that it is not possible – something has to give, something has to change. Either the fellowship of the Father, Son and Spirit grinds to an eternal halt, or Adamic existence is fundamentally reordered. Either the love of the Triune God is broken, or Adamic flesh is converted to God. There has to be a conversion, a fundamental restructuring either in the being and character of God, or in the being and character of Adam.

The entrance of the fellowship of the Father, Son and Spirit into our alienation and estrangement did not mean the ruin of the Trinity – it meant war. As Luke tells us, Jesus Christ beat his way forward by blows. The Son of God entered into our broken, fallen, alienated human existence. He took upon himself our fallen flesh. He stood in Adam's shoes, in Israel's shoes, in our shoes, and he steadfastly refused to be like Israel. He entered into fallen human existence and steadfastly refused to be 'fallen' in it. Step-by-step, blow-by-blow, moment-by-moment, he loved his Father with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength. Step-by-step, blow-by-blow, moment-by-moment, he hammered out his sonship on the anvil of fallen Adamic existence. Step-by-step, blow-by-blow, moment-by-moment, he bent back the sin-gnarled existence of Adam.

It took 33 years of fire and trial, of temptation, loud crying and tears. What we see in Gethsemane, the gut-wrench of it all, the pain and overwhelming weight, the struggle, the passion, the agony, is a window into the whole life of Jesus Christ. To relegate the suffering of Jesus Christ, the agony that he bore, to a few infinite moments on the cross, is to miss the point entirely. His whole life was a harrowing ordeal of struggle, of suffering, of trial and tribulation and pain. For he lived out his sonship inside nothing less than fallen Adamic existence. From the moment of his birth, as Calvin saw, he began to pay the agonising price of our liberation.

The death of Jesus Christ was the Son's ultimate identification with fallen Adam, and the supreme expression of faithfulness to his own identity as the One who lives in fellowship with the Father in the Spirit. For he truly entered into our brokenness and estrangement and alienation. He bore the violent contradiction in his own being, the judgement of God, and he resolved it through fire and trial, by dying to his Adamic flesh, by crucifying it on Calvary. For in no other way could he live out his fellowship with his Father – as the *incarnate* Son, in the teeth of the Fall – except through the radical circumcision of his Adamic flesh.

The intolerable 'No!' shouted by *God* at the Fall translated into incarnation and into the personal refusal

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Irving, *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving* (vol. 5; London: Strahan, 1865), 328.

of Jesus Christ to live in darkness. 'I will not walk in darkness. I will not forsake my Father. I will not turn my back on the Spirit'. And more important, the 'No!' of *God* to the Fall translated into the 'Yes!' of the incarnate Son. 'I will love my Father with all of my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I will live in the Holy Spirit. I will be true to myself as the Father's beloved'. The price tag on that 'Yes!' was 33 years of suffering, in and through which the incarnate Son was steadily turning Adamic existence inside out, steadily bending back the estrangement of the Fall, steadily reordering human relationship with God. There on the cross, it all came to a triumphal end. There he took the decisive step in converting Adamic flesh. There on the cross, he shouted his final and decisive 'No!' to Adam, and his final and decisive 'Yes!' to his Father. He died – and Adamic existence died with him.

On the cross, Jesus penetrated to the root of Adam's estrangement. There, he walked into the unimaginable abyss of Adam's alienation, where Adam's guts were wrenching with fear, where the razor had cut through Adam's soul and he could only feel abandoned and rejected, despised and utterly forsaken by God. On the cross, Jesus experienced the gut-wrenching hell of Adamic existence to the uttermost, crying out in agony, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?' But it was precisely there, precisely in the unimaginable abyss of that unspeakable pain, that Jesus Christ knew and loved his Father. The final word was not 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' The final word was 'Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit'. Even there, *especially* there, in the belly of human alienation, the fellowship of the Father, Son and Spirit won out.

What emerged on the other side of the cross is a man, a human being from the sin-gnarled stock of fallen Adamic existence, who was and is utterly right for the Father, a man from the belly of alienation who rose in face-to-face fellowship with God the Father almighty, a man from Adam's seed in whom no trace of the Fall can be found, who lives forever inside the circle of the Trinitarian life of God.

The death of Jesus Christ was not the end of the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit; it was its absolute triumph. For dying on the cross was the Son's final and decisive refusal to be Adam. As such, the death of Christ was the radical circumcision of Adamic flesh, the end of human estrangement from God, the final act of a fundamental reordering of Adamic existence into union and fellowship with God. In Jesus Christ, Adam and fallen Adamic existence came to an end – and to a new beginning.

Jesus Christ is not a divine tool that God picked up and used for a while and then put back in the heavenly toolbox. And he most certainly is not a mere accountant who balances a legal ledger in heaven. Jesus Christ is living reconciliation, living atonement. He is man, from the sin-gnarled stock of Adam, right with God the Father. He is Adamic man at-one with the Father, living in union and communion with the Father, accepted and embraced by the Father and seated at his right hand in the fellowship of the Spirit, now and forever.

Why did Jesus Christ die? He died because the Triune God loves us with an everlasting and passionate love, because the Triune God absolutely refuses to allow us to be destroyed. He died because the only way to get from the Fall of Adam to the right hand of God the Father almighty was through a profound recreation of Adamic existence that required incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Adamic flesh.

## **The *Good News***

But even here, we are only scratching the surface of the meaning of Jesus Christ. Does the New Testament leave us staring at the ascension of Jesus wondering how we are going to follow Jesus? Was all of this hammered out through fire and trial so that we would have a great example to follow? If we stop here with the death and resurrection and ascension of Christ, we may have Adamic existence converted to God, we may have one from among our ranks seated at the Father's right hand and living in the fellowship of the Spirit, but we still have no gospel, and the eternal purpose of the Triune God

for us is still unfulfilled. For as yet, we are still spectators, still on the outside looking in.

The deepest joy of the New Testament lies precisely in the fact that it sees that in this *one* man, Jesus Christ, God was dealing not just with Adam or with a general Adamic existence, but with the whole human race. The New Testament does not leave us contemplating Jesus Christ from a distance. It leaves us seeing ourselves crucified with Christ, and raised up with him, and seated with him at the Father's right hand. The Apostle Paul sums it up in the simplest and most stunning statement in 2 Corinthians 5:14. Paul tells us that he reached a conclusion that changed his life and changed the way he saw history and every human being within it. The conclusion was that '... one died for all, therefore all died ...'. It was Jesus Christ alone who died and who rose again, but Paul sees clearly that the whole human race was bound up in what happened to Jesus Christ.

Paul does not explain how this could be; he is just thrilled and awed that it is so. He sees that in this one man, God gathered the whole human race together. There are hints of this gathering, this connection, in the Old Testament. Think of the High Priest's ministry in the holy of holies, where he represented all of Israel, such that what happened to him in that holy place happened to Israel. Think of the story of David and Goliath, where the futures of the two respective nations were bound up in the outcome of the battle between these two men. If Goliath won, then the Israelites would be the slaves of the Philistines. If David won, then the Philistines would be the slaves of the Israelites. Think of the figure of Adam, whose fall had such momentous implications for all of humanity. The connection between the High Priest and Israel, David and Goliath and their nations, Adam and humanity foreshadow the connection between Jesus Christ and humanity.

Underneath Paul's conclusion that 'one died for all, therefore all died', and underneath John's proclamation that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and underneath the New Testament's declaration that Jesus Christ is Lord, lies the foundational truth that there is a decisive connection between Jesus Christ and the human race. We were and are bound up in him and in what became of him. We were implicated in what happened to Jesus, so much so that *our* identity, *our* existence, *our* past, present and future, *our* relationship with God and with one another and with creation, were all fundamentally reordered in this *one* man. It was not just Adamic existence that was crucified in Jesus Christ; it was Adam and you and me and the whole human race.

The New Testament is preoccupied with Jesus Christ, the Son of God who became flesh. It wants us to know what became of God, what became of the Son of God. So it narrates the history of the Son for us. He, the eternal Son of God, became human, born of the virgin Mary. He lived. He died. He rose again. He ascended and sits now and forever at the right hand of God the Father almighty. The reason the New Testament is so preoccupied with what became of the Son of God is that it knows that something was becoming of us, of the human race, in him. It tells us what became of the Son because it wants us to see what became of the human race in his life and death and resurrection and ascension. Paul saw it. He declares: 'one died for all, therefore all died'.

The foundational truth which makes the gospel *good news* to us is the connection between Jesus Christ and the human race. That connection means that one died for all; therefore all died. That connection means that the death of Christ was our death; that there and then in Jesus Christ the human race was crucified, dead and buried; that on the Cross of Calvary our disease, our estrangement, our alienation, our flesh was crucified.

Paul saw it. He saw that Adam's fall and ours, that Adam's alienation and ours, that Adam's sin and ours, was called to an abrupt end, that there and then in Jesus Christ it was all put to death. And *then* Paul saw the resurrection. If we died in Jesus Christ, what happened to us in Jesus' resurrection? Peter said:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead ... (1 Peter 1:3)

Jesus Christ died and Jesus Christ rose again from the dead on Easter Sunday morning. The heart of the gospel is the news that in his death and resurrection, something was happening to you and to me and to the human race. When he died, we died. And when he rose, we rose again to new life, there and then 2000 years ago. Look at how Paul describes it in Ephesians 2:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved - and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus ... (Ephesians 2:4-6)

The gospel is the astonishing news that something has happened to the Son of God, and the equally astonishing news that in him something was happening to the human race. If the whole human race fell into ruin in Adam – a creature, a mere man – what happened to the human race in the death of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God? Paul tells us. When Jesus Christ died, we died. But that is only the beginning. When he rose, we rose. He ascended and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty, the place of honour and love and delight and complete and utter acceptance, and Paul tells us that in his ascension we too were lifted up and seated with him at the Father's right hand – and there and then welcomed, accepted, embraced forever.

The gospel is the good news of what became of the Son of God, and of what became of us in him. It is the news that Adam and all of us were crucified with Christ, dead and buried, and on the third day Adam and all of us were quickened with new life and raised with Jesus, and then lifted up to the Father's right hand in Jesus' ascension and seated with Christ.

What happened on the Cross? Why did Jesus die? How do we understand the meaning of his death? The death of Jesus Christ was part of a seamless movement in which the Triune God laid hold of the human race and decisively and sovereignly altered its very existence, cleansing it of all alienation, quickening it with new life and lifting it up into union with the Father, Son and Spirit.

It is finished! Hallelujah!

In these four studies, we are 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 humanity's redemption, and with the offering up of the (S?)spirit to the Father.

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. 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. To really hear these words is not only an aid to understanding the word of the Cross, but it is to understand God's purposes for the world. It is to understand something at the very core of human – and divine – life.

## §1. The First Word

***‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’. (Luke 23:34)***

Crucifixion is a painful death,<sup>6</sup> and an opiate of some sort was often given, not because of pity for the victim, but because often the one being crucified would go demented out of fear and/or pain. It was normal for the one being crucified to resist those who sought to crucify them. Terror could drive one into manic states. The two thieves crucified with Christ received the opiate but he did not. Some scholars have suggested that this is because Jesus needed all his sensibilities in order 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. In Israel, the hatred of the entire human race was welling up against its God. Jesus had claimed affinity with the Most High, and so they set upon him. Other complications were there also; human shame at the betrayal of ‘innocent blood’ (see Matthew 27:4, 19, 24; Luke 23:47), and despair that the Jesus Mission had not succeeded. Not only Jesus’ enemies but also some of his friends (including Judas Iscariot) were caught up in the hysteria of anger and hate.

Matthew tells us:

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son.’” The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way. (Matthew 27:38–44; cf. Matthew 4:3, 6)

We can presume that in the drama of this event, the two thieves were participating in the public frenzy of fear, hatred and bitterness, their antisocial anger flaring into uttered blasphemy. Far from having a fellow-feeling for Jesus, they berated him like the rest. They cursed, blasphemed, and spat out words in irrational rage: ‘If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. Save yourself and us!’ Yet this is precisely what Jesus could not do. Gethsemene taught him that. (See Matthew 26:42//Mark 14:36)

Suddenly, one thief stopped his screaming and fell silent. Then he addressed his fellow criminal in the most amazing terms: ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?’ (Luke 23:40). Such words from a person under execution are remarkable, but more remarkable because, moments before, he was berating Jesus 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*?’ (Luke 23:41)

How did he know? How did this incredible change in him take place? What happened in between the blasphemous rage and the soft confession just a few verses later?

I want to suggest the following answer: Jesus spoke his first words from the cross. Something in that cry arrested the thief in his bitterness and transformed him. What was it? It was surely the uttered cry, ‘Father!’

Later we will see that the Cross was all about God’s Fatherhood. Here was the Son crying ‘Abba’.

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<sup>6</sup> See Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

Rightly understood, Fatherhood is what the creation is all about. However, it took the enfleshment and death of the Eternal Father's Son in order to show us what true Father means. Jesus 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, motherhood and childship.

This revelation happened in the life and ministry of the Son, but supremely here on the cross. Suddenly the thief understood both fatherhood and sonship/daughtership. Could it be that his criminal record was connected – in his own history – with failure somewhere in regard to human fatherhood and to his own sonship? We may never know. What we can know, however, is that here was a twisted figure hanging beside one who lived in the dignity of all that being a child of God entails. 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 (e.g. the centurion; Luke 23:47). 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 Jesus' humanity. Nor would we have understood the heart of the Father who loves us and who in Jesus has given us all things. Little wonder that the thief repented.

Yet that was not all. Jesus' petition went on, '*... for they do not know what they are doing*'.

On this verse Walter Brueggemann, who speaks for not a few, suggests:

[Jesus'] initial pleas for forgiveness for his enemies is an act of criticism ... for it asserts the insanity of the dominant culture. On behalf of that world which has now sentenced him, he enters a plea of temporary insanity. A reference should be made here to the insightful interpretation of Paul Lehmann, who shows that the trial of Jesus before Pilate in fact has Pilate, and not Jesus, on trial. The cry of Jesus from the cross, then, may be regarded as a decision (by the Judge) that the defendant (the old order) may not be punished because it is insane.<sup>7</sup>

Is Brueggemann's reading of the situation right? Does his talk of 'temporary insanity' not miss a very point to which this verse seeks to bear witness, namely that we are 'guilty'. The word which comes to us in forgiveness is a word – *God's* word – of *judgement* concerning us. The divine announcement, 'Your sins are forgiven' (Mark 2:5, 9) is a judgement. In Christ, the Just Judge judged in our place, makes a judgement about us. We are guilty. We are forgiven. Indeed, the very word 'forgiveness' itself implies an act of judgement. To say that the death of Christ was required in order to right 'insanity' is, therefore, to rob us of the good news itself. Whereas prodigals think themselves to be out of their 'senses' (Luke 15:17) the verdict of the father is otherwise: 'this son of mine was dead and is alive again ...' (Luke 15:24). If the crowds were not guilty, then they did not need to be forgiven, and so Jesus' prayer would make no sense.

On another level, how could they not have known what they were about? You don't hammer nails into another human being without knowing. You don't cry, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' unless you understand what you are saying. Yes they were 'insane', as are we in our sinning. Yes, they were aware, as was Pilate, that their action constituted murder. But what they did not understand was that that One on the cross was the only person in all history who understood the nature of sin, for he was the only person in all history who had never sinned. Sin is an irrational invasion of the true human spirit and dehumanises persons from true creational being. Only Jesus 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 Jesus was truly the Son of God? Christ had agreed with the High Priest that he, Christ, was indeed

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978), 93. This raises the question too of the relationship between 'punishment' and 'judgement'.

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.*

What we must remember is that the cross of Christ means the exposure of both infinite guilt and infinite love. So T.F. Torrance:

It is the cross itself that shows us all this – but without looking down into the abyss which the cross reveals and spans we cannot understand the person or the work of the mediator; and we cannot understand the ‘cross’. It is Christ the mediator, true God and true man, who bridges the chasm of hell in his own incarnate person, and not only in his bodily suffering, but as Calvin insisted, in the fearful pain and judgement which he bore on his soul. He bridges the chasm in his own person and all that pain he takes upon and into his person for our sakes. That is the point we have to try to grasp. While sin is the double fact of man’s opposition to God and God’s opposition to man, Christ came in the concrete likeness of our flesh of sin, as St Paul expressed it, condemning sin in the flesh, numbering himself with the transgressors and submitting himself to the judgement of God upon our sin. ‘For us he was made sin who knew no sin’ [2 Cor 5:21]. He even became a curse for us.

The depths of that are quite incomprehensible, especially when we realise that sin contains at its very heart and constitution as sin the divine wrath. By taking upon himself human guilt, Christ placed himself at the very point where God’s Godness, God’s holy majesty, resists sin. Jesus entered into that very situation where man’s being is menaced and threatened by annihilation through separation from God, and yet held in existence by the very fact of the divine judgement against it. And so by entering into the very situation where all the divine majesty is directed against the sinner in his and her sin, the Son of God, it might well be said, ‘hazarded’ and ‘staked’ his very existence and being in order to take all that fearful tension and judgement upon himself in order to save us.

Christ’s salvation is of such a kind that it expresses the ultimate reality of guilt and exposes it in all its stark actuality. It exposes it in terms of the wrath of God, but at the same time manifests in the midst of it all the infinite and overwhelming love of God, and enacts the union of God and man in a union and communion that nothing can undo. In forgiveness Jesus Christ offers himself on behalf of and in the place of the sinner, and the gulf of human sin and guilt is spanned, but in throwing a bridge over the abyss, the depth and breadth of it are made still more evident. That is why Golgotha casts such a dark shadow over the world. That is why the cross unmasks the inhumanity of man, at once exposing sin and guilt and dealing with them at their worst – in mankind’s ultimate attack upon God in Jesus Christ – in God’s attack of love upon the inhumanity of mankind – and out of the heart of that there come two words that reveal the infinite guilt of humanity and the infinite love of God. ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ [Matt 27:46]. ‘Father forgive them, for they know not what they do’ [Luke 23:34].<sup>8</sup>

Only the person who has resisted sin unto death – and extinguished it – truly knows the extent of sin’s power. 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 liberate humanity from its sin ... to gather all humanity into the family of God.

This cry, of course, puts humanity into a bracket it had not previously known. Human persons must now understand and forgive, even their enemies. This is life.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (ed. Robert T. Walker; Milton Keynes/Downers Grove: Paternoster/ IVP, 2008), 255–6.

<sup>9</sup> George Herbert, ‘The Agonie’ in *The Poetical Works of George Herbert, with a Memoir of the Author and Notes* (ed. Robert Eldridge Amis Willmot; Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1863), 37.



## For discussion

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?
2. How do we link this cry with Jeremiah 31:31–34 and Matthew 26:28?
3. What did Jesus mean by saying, ‘... for they do not know what they are doing’? What do we mean by ‘the deceit of sin’?

## §2. The Second Word

***‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise’. (Luke 23:43)***

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 person’s being. Following repentance, then, a person is not what they were 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 this twisted victim on crude timbers by acknowledging that Jesus is the King of a particular kingdom. ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom’. Whatever the thief said he certainly believed Christ was the Messiah, and he believed in the Kingdom, whatever he understood it to mean. 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 says, ‘All who came before me were thieves and robbers’ (John 10:8). Jesus sees them as spawn of the Thief, Satan himself. In John 10, Jesus refers to false shepherds who abused and used the sheep, having no compassion. Other parts of Scripture tell of the evil of thieving. It is one of many forms of rebellion against the true order of creation. In Ephesians 4:28 Paul gives the principle of theft on the one hand, and work on the other: ‘Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy’. Thieving is taking away what another possesses; true work is labouring in order to give to those who are in need. The nobility of work is defaced by the evil of stealing.

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. Human nostalgia is evoked by the word. There in the beginning was the Garden, the Eden of delight. There the primal couple had fellowship with God and walked with God in the cool of the day. Sin had caused their 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!

Walter Brueggemann writes of this verse: ‘[Jesus’] assertion of paradise ... is a speech about the delegitimization of the world that killed him. Now he speaks from a very different value system. The very one called criminal is now welcomed to paradise; the outcast is the welcomed one. Jesus’ new way of acting and speaking announces that another way is now operating. It is the final assertion that the old way is null and void’.<sup>10</sup>

The image of the garden recalls not only how the Bible’s narrative begins, but also how it ends. The final chapter begins:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup> through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup> Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; <sup>4</sup> they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup> And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:1–5)

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<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination* 93.

This suggests that God's purposes for creation are not thwarted by the cross; on the contrary, they are fulfilled! So not only *back* to the Garden but also *on 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 Christ in the Garden. Paradise is to be in fellowship again *with God*. Indeed, what makes it Paradise is precisely the divine life and presence. So to pose the questions, 'What is Paradise? Where is it? Who goes there?' is really to miss the point. It is certainly to misinterpret the point of Jesus' words to the penitent thief: 'Today you will be *with me* in Paradise'. Few have put it better than Helmut Thielicke:

The 'today' signifies that the history that God had begun with the thief would be neither stopped nor interrupted. 'Paradise' is not meant to link up with the traditional imagery and evoke association with glorious forms of enjoyment. It is itself interpreted by the 'with me' (*met' emou*). Paradise is abiding fellowship with the crucified one who has overcome death. It is clinging to the Father's neck.

I do not believe in the future life because of some dream of the hereafter. I believe in it because I am already the companion of him who has begun a history with me and will never let me fall away from his faithfulness. With him I go confidently into the darkness and inconceivability and total otherness of the future world. For he, who is one and the same, will never be alien or other to me. I shall always recognize him whose voice has always been as familiar to me as the shepherd's voice is to his sheep. In his person the dialectic between continuity and discontinuity which has permeated all reflection on existence before and after the resurrection is finally stilled.<sup>11</sup>

## For discussion

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? What ought we make of Thielicke's interpretation of this verse?
3. How could we apply this word to our lives?

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<sup>11</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith, Volume Three: Theology of the Spirit* (ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; vol. 3; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 410.

### §3. The Third Word

*‘Woman, behold, your son!’ ... ‘[Son], here is your mother’. (John 19:26–27)*

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 us, ‘He is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters’ (Hebrews 2:11). Psalm 22:22 is quoted of him (in Hebrews 2:12), ‘I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you’. Before his death he said to his Father, ‘I have declared your name to 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 (see John 2).

Now, near the end of this chapter in his earthly ministry, Jesus was caring for his mum, 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 into 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 people and no less for her.

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 here is One who remembers graciously the commitment of family love.

The Gospels show us that Jesus’ biological siblings were by no means sympathetic with him. In fact to the contrary (see John 7:1f.; Matthew 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’ (Matthew 12:50). Certainly, throughout Jesus’ ministry, from the time when he first ran away to attend to his Father’s business (Luke 2:41–49), there is a radical redefining – a widening – of what ‘family’ means. No longer is family limited to blood ties. As Ray Anderson notes, ‘Family means much more than consanguinity, where blood ties provide the only basis for belonging’.<sup>12</sup> Now it encompasses all who do the will of Jesus’ Father. Jesus’ words from the cross to Mary and to the beloved disciple (traditionally believed to have been John) reflect this new constitution. ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ ... ‘[Son], behold your mother’. Here, Jesus emphasises that this disciple has become his true brother by stressing that his mother is now the mother of the beloved disciple and that the disciple is now the son of his mother. Jesus pronounces them to be a family, for better or worse (cf. Romans 16:13).<sup>13</sup>

Bauckham and Hart also offer the following insightful commentary on John 19:26–27:

Many commentators want to find some grand theological symbolism in this event, as though it were too trivial for the Gospel to record if it meant no more than it seems on the surface to mean. But the surface meaning is not

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<sup>12</sup> Ray S. Anderson and Dennis B. Guernsey, *On Being Family: A Social Theology of the Family* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 40.

<sup>13</sup> See David E. Garland and Diana R. Garland, ‘The Family: Biblical and Theological Perspectives’ in *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society, and Family* (ed. Christian D. Kettler and Todd H. Speidell; Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1990), 230.

trivial. We should not miss the basic humanity of Jesus' words. Just as Jesus' agony and desolation are as human as any, so like anyone facing death Jesus turns to the people who have meant most to him at the level of human affection: his mother and his closest friend. His love for all people does not negate this particular affection for particular people. Jesus acknowledges the two great forms of human affection – family and friendship – and he brings them together in entrusting his mother to his friend and his friend to his mother.

If we insist on seeing more than this in the event, then we must take that thoroughly human affection of Jesus for his mother and his friend into the larger meaning, not leave it aside. We could, it has been suggested, see in this new relationship that Jesus, crucified and dying, creates between his mother and his friend the beginning of the church. It is the first example of the way Jesus' death brings people together in new relationships given them by Jesus. Just as Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple would not otherwise have been related, had not Jesus at his death brought them together, and charged them with being mother and son to each other, so the church is the community of people who would not otherwise be related but whom the crucified Jesus brings together, forging new relationships through his death for us. But if we do follow this line of thought, then the thoroughly human reality of what happens at the cross remains very important. We are not to be concerned with a splendidly abstract sort of love in which people love humanity but have no real concern or affection for individuals. The relationships Jesus creates in the church are the continuation of his own very human love for his own mother and the continuation of his own very human affection for his best friend. Moreover, entrusting his mother to his friend means something very practical: the disciple takes her into his own home.

If this is, as it were, the model for relationships in the church, then the way that Christians should be relating is as though they were Jesus' best friend entrusted with the care of his mother, or as though they were Jesus' mother given his best friend in place of a son. Jesus in his dying did not put human affection to death. He brought it to new life, set it free to run in new channels, at once deepened and extended it. Jesus entrusted us to each other. He charged us all with the responsible care of each other. So the church is where those who lack family affection should find it. The church is where those who lack friends should find friends. The church is where the love of families and friends can be extended to others. The church is where those who need the support that can come only in close relationships should find it.<sup>14</sup>

A comparison of the first two words from the cross in John's account when compared with those from Mark and Luke yields a fruitful observation. In John's account, Jesus is not alone in his dying, but is surrounded by a small and faithful company gathered at the foot of the cross. Here in his Cross, Jesus is forging new relationships, not just with those who are outside the disciple band (as is the thief of the cross) but with those who are central members of it. This recalls that we must not only love our enemies but that we must also love one another. So here, in his dying breaths, Jesus is fashioning a new relationship between his mum and the disciple who has been closest to him and who in the Fourth Gospel represents the Church that is to come. 'When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son'. Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother'. And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. Here, the Church maternal; (represented by Mary) is being received into the home of the Church apostolic (represented by John).<sup>15</sup>

## For discussion

1. 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?

2. How could we apply the thoughts of this word in our daily living, and especially in our newly defined familial relationships?

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *At The Cross: Meditation on People Who Were There* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 120–1.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas A. Smail, *Once and For All: A Confession of the Cross* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 27.

## §4. The Fourth Word

***'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34)***

Matthew and Mark both record this cry. Some in the crowd 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 could not look upon his Son as sin (see Habakkuk 1:13). 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 by God.*

*It was the sixth hour, and a great darkness spread over all the land.*

Why did it grow dark at this point? What had happened between heaven and earth? The scene was still the same, no one had thought up any new torture, the soldiers were still throwing dice for his tunic: the passion was stagnating in funereal expectation. But what was really happening was a death inside a death. During those three hours, until the ninth, he was wrestling with an even worse executioner, he was undergoing a more appalling annihilation. As in the garden, there was again this monstrous silence: but here it was a thousand times worse, because suddenly everything – his goodness and men's malice, the gentle cornfields and the polecats that laid them waste – all seemed utterly and grotesquely pointless.

As from the sixth hour the dying Christ was an orphan. He no longer had his mother, he'd given her to someone else. And now the Father died on him; those three hours of darkness were the agony of the Father in his brain.

*"My God, why have you abandoned me?"*

The other words that he said from the cross were forced out in a weak voice from an exhausted body. But these he shouted *with a great voice*; it was a shout which had to reach the most desperate and remote, those who would remain unmoved by the groans and the blood; all those who, when going over the story of the passion heard from a priest in their childhood, say: "But my life is far worse than that afternoon on the cross."

Within the layers of that darkness he was the God of those people. Where's the tragic pit in the depths of which man is most sad and most stifled by a deadly sickness? It's here: Christ plunged into it and was equal with all the unhappy people who have lost the Father; because he never reckoned to be born and to die among the living without sharing the ninth hour with us all.<sup>16</sup>

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 his antithesis 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 to himself, but to do that God must deal drastically, indeed terribly, with sin. He must judge sin in his flesh (Romans 8:3). This God does by making himself to be *as* sin, by making himself as his antithesis – his extremest opposite, with what is alien to himself – in order to bring it to nought. God himself dies in order to bring an end to all that would seek his death, and in this death God comes to himself.<sup>17</sup> So Žižek: 'In the standard form of atheism, God dies for men who stop believing in Him; in Christianity, God dies for Himself'.<sup>18</sup> At this point, any simplistic notions that we might harbour about what it means for God to take on flesh are 'shattered upon the cross ... [Indeed], what we are confronted with here is the question of how we can continue to speak of the transcendence of God at all in the face of this cry of dereliction'.<sup>19</sup>

The Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde is worth citing here at length:

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<sup>16</sup> Luigi Santucci, cited in Bauckham and Hart, *At The Cross* 94–5.

<sup>17</sup> See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (trans. E.B. Speirs and J. Burdon Sanderson; vol. 2; London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co., 1895), 221.

<sup>18</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity, Short Circuits* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 15.

<sup>19</sup> Ray S. Anderson, 'The Man Who Is for God' in *Theological Foundations for Ministry: Selected Readings for a Theology of the Church in Ministry* (ed. Ray S. Anderson; Edinburgh/Grand Rapids: T&T Clark/Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 230, 231.

Most everyone – conservative, orthodox, or liberal – seems to have trouble thinking the cry could be real. It seems as though having dispatched him to a humiliating, cruel, and agonizing death, we are surprised and shocked that he should find it all that bad. We just can not give up on making him our religious hero, desperately seeking in him the last spark of divinity, the courage, the faith, that will somehow see him through and thus enable us to avoid facing the end. There must be some way for him to transcend the fate to which we have dispatched him. It is as though by crucifying him we had merely provided the occasion for him to exercise his divinity, or as though as his murderers we hope that our crime was all a bad dream. For if he goes into the blackness of death forsaken even by God, what chance do we have?

But that is, of course, precisely the point. We have no chance. He comes to die for us, to enter into the blackness, the nothingness of death alone. Thus he goes the road of being human to the end. But it is even more than that. He took our place. He took our nature, being born under the law. He was made a curse for us, and he followed the course to death on the cross. In the end he cries out in an agony that Mark concentrates into the totally human question, “Why?” And there is no answer. Beyond the “Why?” there is only God. We are, once again, simply brought up against God. God is done to us. The true human can only wait on God here. “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” The human Jesus brings us to that end. This is his self-emptying ... Not that he divests himself temporarily of some divine prerogatives, but that he pours himself out into that last desolate cry.

Only by so pouring himself out can he finally be for us. Were he to hold something back or somehow to be protected from the stark reality of the death, he would be our lawgiver but not our Savior. His dying words to us would be some sort of admonition to stop our perfidy, shape up, and perhaps take him down from the cross before it all goes too far. His dying would be perhaps just the supreme example of how to die, and so the most strenuous law of all. That, one might say, is the theological way of taking him down from the cross. Only by truly dying does he put an end to us as old beings so that we can be made new. Only so do we come up against the one who calls into being that which is from that which is not.<sup>20</sup>

Today there is a psychiatric therapy called Primal Therapy which has to do with what has been called ‘the Primal Scream’. Arthur Janov, its initiator, discovered that there is a terrible scream which a person emits (especially neurotic persons) when they begin, even against their 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 believes exists in those who in some sense become separated relationally from their parents. What this signifies in terms of a person being separated from God could be breathtaking.

However, on the cross Jesus uttered no such *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 thereby destroyed.

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 Jesus takes their sting, as also the sting of death. He takes sin’s weight, its fiery penalty, its innate components of wrath. He feels the smothering evil of human filth and moral pollution. He actually knows in his own being the dreadful anger of God upon all sin. He must – as the man in our place – 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 (with whom the Father is never anything less than ‘well-pleased’), but there must be talk of the Son bearing the wrath of God upon evil. This is not to justify any attempt at a theodicy. Such attempts are futile. Indeed, the question ‘How could God allow this to happen?’ is usually the onlookers question. “The person who is in the grip of a catastrophe, or is

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<sup>20</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 112–3. See also Torrance, *Mediation* 42–5, 79–81.



already in the jaws of a mass death, asks differently about God'.<sup>21</sup> And the one who in that situation knows that God too has cried the cry of abandonment knows that God cries with them, and that God alone can answer such a cry.

*Jesus 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 (Zechariah 13:7; cf. Matthew 26:31–39; Hebrews 2:9–10; 5:7–8), 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 the pain of humanity for all time.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:3–6)

The Suffering Servant of the Lord was so marred, that he was not recognisable as a human being. Likewise Jeremiah had sensed the same agony of spirit:

'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?  
Look around and see.  
Is any suffering like my suffering  
that was inflicted on me,  
that the LORD brought on me  
in the day of his fierce anger?' (Lamentations 1:12)

There are a number of ways in which our experiences of darkness relate to Jesus' on the cross in the darkness of Golgotha. Bauckham and Hart suggest two: First, we find Jesus Christ with us in our darkness. On the cross he shared our darkness. His loving presence with us in our darkness lightens it. In our desolation we find the comfort of his presence. Because he suffered even abandonment by God, he is God's very presence with us even in abandonment. It is like being visited in the condemned cell by someone who loves us enough to come and share the experience with us. Bringing God's love into our darkness, Jesus removes the lovelessness at the heart of our darkness. Or when we look out at the darkness of our world, the seeming absence of God in such killing fields as Rwanda, or the dis-gracing of human persons in Guantánamo Bay, or the abandonment and mistreatment of vulnerable patients in old people's 'homes' or mental health facilities, or the desolating darkness of ignorance of God and hatred of God that clouds so much of our own society, still we can recognise God's presence in it because we recognise God in the darkness of Golgotha. That is the first kind of experience of the cross in our darkness: when Jesus' presence with us in it brings God's love into our lovelessness and God's presence into our forsakenness. But there is second kind of experience. Sometimes in our own darkness or in that of the world we can find only the darkness that Jesus endured. We feel without God, and we continue to do so. We find no hope or consolation. We simply find ourselves there in the darkness with Jesus in his desolation.<sup>22</sup> It was this second kind of darkness that the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff bore witness to following the sudden death of his twenty-five-year-old son:

I am at an impasse, and you, O God, have brought me here. From my earliest days, I heard of you. From my earliest days, I believed in you. I shared in the life of your people: in their prayers, in their work, in their songs, in their listening for your speech and in their watching for your presence. For me your yoke was easy. On me your presence smiled.

Noon has darkened. As fast as she could say, "He's dead," the light dimmed. And where are you in this darkness? I learned to spy you in the light. Here in this darkness I cannot find you. If I had never looked for you, or looked but never found, I would not feel this pain of your absence. Or is it not your absence in which I dwell but your elusive troubling presence?

<sup>21</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End – The Beginning: The Life of Hope* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Philadelphia: Fortress, 2004), 34.

<sup>22</sup> Bauckham and Hart, *At The Cross* 92.

Will my eyes adjust to this darkness? Will I find you in the dark – not in the streaks of light which remain, but in the darkness? Has anyone ever found you there? Did they love what they saw? Did they see love? And are there songs for singing when the light has gone dim? The songs I learned were all of praise and thanksgiving and repentance. Or in the dark, is it best to wait in silence?<sup>23</sup>

Here Wolterstorff suggests that we cannot answer Jesus' question. We can only die *with him* and await God's answer in him.<sup>24</sup>

Another perspective on the decisiveness of those three decisive hours on Golgotha and its relationship with our pain and experiences of darkness has been offered by Hans Urs von Balthasar:

"Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour." It was as if the cosmos sensed that something decisive was going on here, as if it were participating in the darkness invading the soul of Christ. For our part, we do not need to experience this darkening, for we are already estranged and dark enough. It would suffice if we held onto our faith in a world that has become dark all around us; it would be enough for us to be convinced that all inner light, all inner joy and security, all trust in life owes its existence to the darkness of Golgotha and never to forget to give God thanks for it.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly Henri Nouwen was right when he penned: 'There is no journey to God outside of the journey that Jesus made'.<sup>26</sup>

A prayer:

*God the Father of our Lord Jesus,  
we remember those for whom there is darkness at noon and inconsolable loss.  
We pray for those who in their faithfulness to Jesus endure his desolation.  
Be with them in the darkness until the light of your presence dawns for them again.  
We pray for those who in their desolation have not yet known Jesus – that in his desolation they may find your presence with them in theirs.  
In the plight of a world that lacks your love and in the tragedy of a world that refuses your presence, help us to see Jesus crucified as your presence in the world's darkness.  
Help us to find in him your unfailing love for your world, his faith in your purpose for your world, our hope for the noontime sunshine of your presence in your whole creation.  
We pray for ourselves when the shadow of death falls on our lives or the prison doors shut us in.  
Lord Jesus, let us neither lose sight of you on Calvary nor fail to meet you again in the garden.*<sup>27</sup>

## For discussion

1. What are some of the interpretations of Jesus' cry? How do they stand in the light of Psalm 22?

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<sup>23</sup> Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 69.

<sup>24</sup> See Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being A Theologian of the Cross: Reflections of Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *You Crown the Year With Your Goodness: Sermons Through the Liturgical Year* (trans. Graham Harrison; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 85–6.

<sup>26</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 56.

<sup>27</sup> Adapted from Bauckham and Hart, *At The Cross* 93–4.

2. It is said that a person in pain 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 a person 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?

## §5. The Fifth Word

### *‘I am thirsty’. (John 19:28)*

This utterance, recorded in John 19:28–30, has a context: ‘Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty”. A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips’. For some, this cry, ‘I thirst,’ is a mechanical fulfillment of the prophecy indicated in Psalm 69 (a so-called Messianic Psalm), verses 3 and 21. Yet the most plain meaning solution is to see that Jesus 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 utilised 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 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 image 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 humanity’s needs on every level of our being, and also supporting and sustaining the entire creation.

We are told, ‘Keep your heart with all diligence for from it flow the issues of life’ (Proverbs 4:23). Human beings, created in the image of God, are called to be sub-fountains, conduits of the gracious generosity of God towards all creation. Wonderful as this truth is, it points to yet another truth, namely that human beings are dependent creatures, totally contingent upon God. God formed us out of the dust of the earth and breathed the breath of life into us. At best, we are a fascinating living creature, a ‘praying animal’.<sup>28</sup> Minimally, we are simply a handful of dust – dust with a wonderful destiny. And yet we seek to avoid the destiny God has set for us. Sin has made us seek to be independent of God and dependent only upon ourselves. Even so, it is still true that we live and move and have our being in God (Acts 17:28). That we buck against this reality (what theologians call our ‘ontology’) is the cause of so much of our existential angst and pain.

God’s gracious abundancy ought to fascinate us, but sadly enough it rarely does. A statement like ‘the river of God brims over with water’ (Psalm 65:9), or ‘There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God’ (Psalm 46:4), are concepts which do not attract many of us. Instead, we are more fascinated by what we consider to be our ‘own resources’. We profess to find depths which we can never exhaust, *within ourselves*. In a sense we have become creatures more fascinated with God’s creation than with creation’s loving Creator. The complexity within us is often, sadly enough, that of sinful propensities. The image of God has gone into reverse!

With the cry ‘I am thirsty’, John makes contact with Mark’s account of Jesus’ death and recalls that ‘the triumph that he wants to emphasise is being won in a context of dire need and deprivation. The king of Israel on his cross-throne is also a parched and dehydrated man suffering a thirst that we well-watered Westerners have never experienced. His cry of thirst is the expression of his pain’.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, John is keen to highlight that Jesus’ cry is a fulfilment of scripture, and other commentators have suggested various verses from the psalms of which it might be an echo. Psalm 42 is often suggested as an example of where the relationship between physical thirst and spiritual thirst are interlocked:

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<sup>28</sup> See Robert W. Jenson, *Essays in Theology of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 117–131.

<sup>29</sup> Smail, *Once and For All* 27.

As the deer pants for streams of water,  
so my soul pants for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When can I go and meet with God?  
My tears have been my food day and night,  
while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" (Psalm 42:1–3)

If this is anywhere near what John has in mind regarding Jesus' cry then it suggests a reading alongside Mark's account of Jesus' cry of forsakenness. 'The king on the cross is thirsting with all his being for a restoration of his undimmed fellowship with his Father'.<sup>30</sup>

Surely this One on the cross understands the utterance of the psalmists:

'O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land *where there is no water*.' (Psalm 63:1)

'My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God'. (Psalm 84:2)

'I stretch out my hands to you, my heart like a land thirsty for you'. (Psalm 143:6)

He also understands that it is sin which brings aridity. Psalm 107:33–35 has it, 'He turned rivers into a desert, flowing springs into thirsty ground, and fruitful land into a salt waste, because of the wickedness of those who lived there. He turned the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into flowing springs ...'.

The explanation is simple. Human beings are continuously dependent upon God for the supply of life, and when we turn from God we become arid. Our sin makes us dry and lifeless. Hence God's admonition through Jeremiah: '... 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' (2:13). In our sin, we create cisterns for ourselves, but they crack and become empty, and we become dried-out creatures, crude representations of our true selves in Christ.

The woman who came to the well (in John 4) was told that if she drank of the supply on which she had depended she would thirst over and over 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 suddenly became vivified and began to flow out to others.<sup>31</sup>

On the cross, Jesus took into himself the entirety of the aridity of sin. In suffering the world's sinfulness he absorbed into himself our dreary dryness. In the Great Separation he had to go out into the arid desert of humanity'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 given to him to do 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 but was not allowed even a drop of water upon his tongue. It was *an endless thirst*. This hell is what 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.

Psalm 22:14–15 says, 'I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>31</sup> See Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001), 291–2.

sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death'. The dust of death. We are so dry of ourselves, and it is that dryness – the very dryness of death – that Christ takes into himself. In those moments he must have remembered the invitation of the prophet, 'Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters' (Isaiah 55:1). Or the promise, 'For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground' (Isaiah 44:3). Or, '... waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert' (Isaiah 35:6). 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 we need never thirst again. So he cried, 'I thirst'. In other words, 'I thirst your thirst so that you don't have to any more'.

This was not the cry of a Stoic working out a stint. Here was a truly human person thirsting in a physical way, but then thirsting in a way no person had ever wholly thirsted. In him were all the thirsts of creation, for all time. In him – the thirsty one – was the only one competent to satiate true thirst. Now he could promise, 'They that hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled' (Matthew 5:6), and that 'Those who drink of the water that I give will 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 I have opened by my own suffering and thirst (John 4; Revelation 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 men and women drinking of the water of life would be beautiful. To see rivers of life flowing from us would crown his joy. The awful anguish of thirst would be matched by the satiation desperate sinners would discover.

### **For discussion**

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. 1 Corinthians 10:4; Isaiah 53:4–6; Numbers 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?

## §6. The Sixth Word

*'It is finished'. (John 19:30)*

This second-last cry as recorded in John 19:30 is a *loud cry*. While Christ had undoubtedly been weakened physically by the events leading up to and including his dying, this is not the cry of a feeble or defeated spirit. Rather, having completed the work given to him to do, this word is the confession of his sabbath rest. Certainly, there is nothing more to do.

Jesus' cry is a cry to God. It is also a cry to us. It is also a cry to himself, a self-telling that he has succeeded in his mission. Doubtless, too, it is also a cry to the powers of darkness that he has settled their doom forever.

The Greek word employed here is *'Tetelestai'*, and it contains the word *telos*, which means the *goal* or the *end*.<sup>32</sup> All through his ministry, the cross is the *telos* towards which Jesus has been working. He had told his mother at the wedding feast, 'My time has not yet come' (John 2:4). He had repeated this message to his manipulating brothers in John 7:6–8 when he said, 'My time is not yet fully come'. Jesus 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 is coming when no one can work' (John 9:4). He had added on another occasion, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light' (John 11:9–10). Jesus was also acutely conscious of time, but of the right time.<sup>33</sup> When tempted to withdraw from his true hour he had said, 'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour' (John 12:27).<sup>34</sup> And he added, 'Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out' (John 12:31).

The cross really was the last or final judgement. All judgement was finished there, in Christ.

The last judgment is past. It took place on Christ's Cross. What we talk about as the last judgment is simply the working out of Christ's Cross in detail. The final judgment, the absolute judgment, the crucial judgment for the race took place in principle on the Cross of Christ. Sin has been judged finally there. All judgment is given to the Son in virtue of His Cross. All other debts are bought up there.<sup>35</sup>

Understood christologically, judgement is fully grace.

[The] movement of God's holy love into the heart of the world's evil and agony is not to be understood as a direct act of sheer almighty power, for it is not God's purpose to shatter and annihilate the agents and embodiments of evil in the world, but rather to pierce into the innermost center of evil power where it is entrenched in the piled-up and self-compounding guilt of humanity in order to vanquish it from within and below, by depriving it of the lying structures of half-truth on which it thrives and of the twisted forms of legality behind which it embattles itself and from which it fraudulently gains its power. Here we have an entirely different kind and quality of power, for which we have no analogies in our experience to help us understand it, since it transcends every kind of moral and material power we know, the power which the Bible calls *grace* ...<sup>36</sup>

In John 13:1 we read, '... Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father'. And in John 17:1 he prayed, 'Father, the hour has come'. His hour, then, was the hour of the

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<sup>32</sup> Some technical stuff: The Greek root of τετέλεσται (*tetelestai*) is τελέω (*teleo*) which means 'finish', 'complete', 'end'. It is the root from which we get the word teleological and eschatological, that branch of theology concerned with the 'last things'.

<sup>33</sup> So too Galatians 4:4: 'But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law ...'.

<sup>34</sup> Adrio König, *Here Am I: A Believer's Reflection on God* (Grand Rapids/London: Wm. B. Eerdmans/Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1982), 170: 'If eschatology is concerned with the reaching of a goal, then there can in principle be no eschatology in the Old Testament. It is only possible in and through the history of Jesus Christ'.

<sup>35</sup> Peter T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910), 160–1.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2005), 136.



Cross. In that same prayer he said, 'I have glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do' (17:4). In that prayer, nevertheless, he knew he had one more thing to do – *the work of the Cross!* Earlier on in his public ministry he had said, 'My Father has always worked and I go on working [with him]' (John 5:17). And he added, 'I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these' (John 5:19-20). These 'greater things' were the works of the Cross and the Resurrection. Three times during the course of his ministry (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:32), Jesus had spoken of the exigency of the Cross and Resurrection. Now he was about to complete these works.

The Old Testament prophesied what Messiah would do. The New Testament also expresses many of the objectives of his coming. 1 John 3:8 says plainly, 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil'. Hebrews 2:14–15 supports this: 'Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death'. Christ said he would cast out the prince of this world. He said, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full', and this over and against the thief who had come only to steal, kill and destroy (John 10:10). The first work of the cross, then, was to obliterate evil and take away Satan's great weapon – the fear of death.

Hebrews 9:26 says of Jesus, '... he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself'. Jesus had promised, 'If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:36). Later Paul wrote that 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners ...' (1 Timothy 1:15). Paul also said that Jesus 'gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father' (Galatians 1:4). And Jesus had said at that last meal shared with his friends prior to the cross, '... for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matthew 26:28). 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 humanity. Paul said of Christ, '... we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them' (2 Corinthians 5:14–15). This is the reverse of the Fall where humanity died to God and became alive to itself. This transformation of which the New Testament speaks is constituted in our being reconciled to God. This reconciliation is a finished work. So P.T. Forsyth:

Reconciliation was finished in Christ's death. Paul did not preach a gradual reconciliation. He preached what the old divines used to call the finished work. He did not preach a gradual reconciliation which was to become the reconciliation of the world only piecemeal, as men [sic] were induced to accept it, or were affected by the gospel. He preached something done once for all – a reconciliation which is the base of every souls reconciliation, not an invitation only. What the Church has to do is to appropriate the thing that has been finally and universally done. We have to enter upon the reconciled position, on the new creation.<sup>37</sup>

Paul shows that Christ's great goal here was Lordship: 'For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living' (Romans 14:9). Doubtless Christ 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. One of the radical implications of what Paul is bearing witness to here is that there is now a human being who reigns at God's right hand – reigning for the God who is for us.

Finally – although among many other things – Jesus completed the work of sonship. Galatians 4:4–6 has it, 'But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, *so that we might receive adoption as children*. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"'

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<sup>37</sup> Forsyth, *Work* 86.

Redemption, then, is undertaken by God with a view to us receiving adoption as God's children.

The sixth word is a preachment that 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.<sup>38</sup> 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 made human beings armed with weapons in our hands into the glorious children of God. 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 for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1). It is the authentication of Christ's own promises: 'I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life' (John 5:24). And it gives teeth to Jesus' statement to the woman taken in adultery, 'Neither do I condemn you, go, and sin no more!' (John 8:11).

Karl Barth gives clear voice to the achievement that births the sixth word:

The actual sovereign act of the Word of God is its existence as the man Jesus Christ, in which God's eternal Son united our nature with Himself, made its creatureliness His own, and also took upon Himself the curse which was due it, in order that He might share with it in turn His divine glory. In that He thus becomes ours, we cease to belong to ourselves and become His. In that He thus becomes weak, He becomes in fact strong. In that He thus gives Himself up, He becomes our Lord. In that He was thus made sin, He acts as the only holy one. Right in His condescension and abasement He rises up above every creature and every God. He lets himself be taken prisoner in the power of the god of this world, and in doing so strikes him down and dispatches him once for all. That this is so is confirmed and revealed by His resurrection from the dead. But that which was accomplished in God's Son Jesus Christ in our nature was done in our place and therefore for us. That was once for all our reconciliation too, our justification before God, our sanctification for Him, our becoming heirs of eternal life. On Golgotha, *everything* was accomplished. With this sovereign act is everything (really everything!) which stands against us beaten down. By it is dissolved every obligation we owe to the god of this world (really every one!). Every (really every!) anxiety which we could have in this world was removed in Him. He, Jesus Christ, stands as Victor over our sins of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, over the hosts of temptation, over the horror of death and hell. And with this sovereign act there is erected the kingdom in which we may already, here and now, be children of the Father because of His eternal Son. For in taking our place, he is no longer apart from us. He is become the Head of the body of which we are members. He is become our Advocate at the right hand of the Father, the first-born of many brothers. And the completion of the sovereign act of God's Word, the work of the Holy Spirit, is that it may stand as true and valid, that we may want to and actually do live on the basis of all this: He not without us! He with us, and in this way and thereby, God with us!<sup>39</sup>

That paramount work of God in Jesus Christ and his cross really is finished, done once for all, and 'really effected in the spiritual world in such a way that in history the great victory is not still to be won; it has been won in reality, and has only to be followed up and secured in actuality. In the spiritual place, in Christ Jesus, in the divine nature, the victory has been won'.<sup>40</sup>

## For discussion

1. 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) 1 Corinthians 6:11?

2. If the redemption we enjoy is complete, why do we so often fail to see the changes we long for in our lives? Why do we wrestle with the same temptations, the same failings and the same distractions, day after day? Why can't we break free and move on toward maturity into all that God has

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<sup>38</sup> See Deane Meatheringham, *The Delight of Law* (Blackwood: New Creation, 1977), 36f.

<sup>39</sup> Karl Barth, *God Here and Now* (trans. Paul M. van Buren; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 15–6.

<sup>40</sup> Forsyth, *Work* 77.

accomplished for our sakes?<sup>41</sup>

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 an unfinished work?<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See Robert S. McGee, *The Search For Significance* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1998), 123–38.

<sup>42</sup> For more on this see Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Beyond the Cross* (Blackwood: New Creation Publications, 1988).

## §7. The Seventh Word

*‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ (Luke 23:46)*

Again we are told the cry was a loud one. It was not a scream but a cry. It was, moreover, not the last gasp of a dying, exhausted person, but the strong utterance of one in full possession of his faculties. To the last he had control of all things. This is evident from the response of the centurion who had witnessed the events of the crucifixion and heard the cries, saw the death. He confessed of Jesus, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!’ (Mark 15:39//Matthew 27:54). The centurion knew Jesus’ death was not that of a defeated person, but of one triumphant. The centurion knew that this broken figure dying on a Roman cross was innocent of blasphemy. The centurion knew that this one who had no beauty that we should desire him was precisely who he claimed to be – the Son of God.

The finale to Jesus of Nazareth’s 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, ‘No one takes it from me’ (John 10:18). Here Jesus uses a neuter pronoun, indicating that not only does no person, but no thing such as, say, an evil power or even Satan himself, has power to take away his life. He is Lord to the last. Having accomplished all things, nothing, then, has victory over him, even now at this end.

It is possible to give up one’s spirit.<sup>43</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, for example, recounts his memory of many dispirited soldiers in Japanese prison camps during WWII.<sup>44</sup> 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 there was no point in remaining any longer. He would go to the Father.

This had been increasingly in Jesus’ mind throughout those last weeks and days in Jerusalem. We saw that he had known when his hour had come. John 13:1, 3 records, ‘... Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father ... 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’ (John 14:1–6). 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: ‘I am going away and I am coming back to you. If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe. I will not speak with you much longer, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold on me, but the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me. If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father’ (John 14:28–31). Again he had said, ‘Yes, I came from the Father into the world, and I will leave the world and return to the Father’ (John 16:28).

It would be easy, therefore, to miss the deep importance of the last word of the Cross. ‘Father, into your 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,

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<sup>43</sup> See Helmut Thielicke, *How To Believe Again* (trans. H.G. Anderson; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 188–9.

<sup>44</sup> See Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Concentration Camp & Other Stories* (Blackwood: New Creation, 1983); Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Tall Grow the Tallow-Woods* (Blackwood: New Creation, 2000).

‘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).

Jesus’ serenity 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 you, O LORD, I have taken refuge;  
let me never be put to shame;  
deliver me in your righteousness.  
Turn your ear to me,  
come quickly to my rescue;  
be my rock of refuge,  
a strong fortress to save me.  
Since you are my rock and my fortress,  
for the sake of your name lead and guide me.  
Free me from the trap that is set for me,  
for you are my refuge.  
Into your hands I commit my spirit;  
redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth.

Note the thrust of this passage. The psalmist is in deep trouble, and needs help. His trust is in God. Hence he says, ‘Into your hands I commit my spirit ...’. It is precisely to this truth that Jesus is directing his listeners at the end. So Forsyth: ‘It was not to man’s future, but to a present holy God that Christ Himself poured out His dying soul. It was into God’s hands He committed His Spirit, not to a future that would do Him justice’.<sup>45</sup>

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 Father and the Spirit.

We can only conclude, then, that his last act was one of wholesome submission. As he had submitted ever, as the Son, so now he submitted as well. This, of course, does not mean a conflict of his will was resolved. Such a conflict had never existed. He was always the Son in whom the Father was ‘well-pleased’. He signifies to us that the Father is not to be feared but loved; not dreaded but trusted. Jesus’ submission, then, shows that at the last what matters most of all is the Fatherhood of the Father, and the Sonship of the Son. ‘There in the depths where we are exposed to the final judgements of God, Jesus converted man’s atheistical shout of abandonment and desolation into a prayer of commitment and trust, “Father unto thy hands I commend my spirit”’.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, that this prayer is uttered by one who in grace has become our brother means that Jesus’ prayer is the prayer uttered in his vicarious humanity, *from within our humanity*. That is, Jesus’ prayer constitutes the *human* response to God which God freely and unconditionally provides for us. In Christ, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ becomes humanity’s prayer. In the words of T.F. Torrance, ‘Jesus Christ is our human response to God. Thus we appear before God and are accepted by him as those who are inseparably united to Jesus Christ our great High Priest in his eternal self-presentation to the Father’.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Peter T. Forsyth, ‘Missions the Soul of Civilisation’, *Christian World Pulpit*, 4 May 1910, 275.

<sup>46</sup> Torrance, *Mediation* 43.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 80.

### **For discussion**

1. It appears that Jesus was not afraid of death. How does this link with John 10:17–18? (NB. 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. Matthew 26:38; Hebrews 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?

## Conclusion

The word of the Cross is in essence revealed by the words of the Cross. In these words, as we have seen, we hear the communicated heart of the Father and of his Son and of their liveliness in the Spirit. There is the request for, and so promise of, forgiveness. There is understanding of the sinner and their sin. There is the promise that repentant people are immediately brought into unbridled and eternal communion with the Triune God. 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. 1 Corinthians 15:24–28; Revelation 11:15), yet the work which is the basis for salvation and the defeat of evil is most certainly completed. Human beings do not have to work for salvation. Christ has thirsted that repentant people may never need to thirst, for through Christ's thirsting ours can now be satiated. Finally there is no need to fear 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 embrace in faith the reality of all that happened for God and for us in those three hours, and to make its practical application in our lives. In the *First Word* we see Christ's cry for forgiveness of all. That we needed forgiveness there was no doubt in his mind. And here in Christ that full forgiveness is given to all – even to enemies. History catalogues that many do not want that forgiveness – neither to receive nor to give it. Some seek to find 'justice' apart from forgiveness, misunderstanding that there can be no justice on such terms.

In the *Second Word* we see the whole saga of humanity. Once a glorious creature, women and men lost the glory and bliss of the Garden, the Paradise God made for us. The Cross tells us that the way back to the Garden is opened afresh, and that the door is the wounded flesh of the Father's obedient Son. The Cross also tells us that paradise *is* the relationship of love we have with God.

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 us. It seems to confirm that God is less a Father and more a severe and holy King. It seems to confirm the views many have of God. Those views really determine the way we live, and inform – or deform – the relationships we have. 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-others. In him, 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 and confirms the three previous words.

The *Fifth Word* tells us that Christ thirsted our thirst before the Father. His resources were brought to their end, but he could still call upon the Father for his needs. God is the Fountain of Living Waters, human beings the under-fountain. Even so, our 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 all because of the Atonement. The Spirit flows from within us, bringing rivers of grace and love and healing to a deeply broken and besmirched world. We have this power of the Cross to make us useful and enriching for the humanity community.



The *Sixth Word* is 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. The Church lives from this Word and proclaims it in its life with great assurance, but not highhandedness, self-sufficiency, or presumption. Every moment every believer will be needy, dependent upon those same rich resources of grace and love which birthed the Cross.

The final word of the Cross – *the Seventh* – is a word of serenity. There is no need to fear death. 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 (Romans 8:9–11). If the Son, our elder Brother, 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 of God's never-receding presence.

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!'

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