



SEVEN TIMES JESUS SPOKE FROM THE CROSS AS HE DIED IN THE PLACE OF SINNERS.

LET US TAKE LESSONS FROM EACH OF THEM.

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LUKE 23:34 THEN SAID JESUS, FATHER, FORGIVE THEM;
FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO. AND THEY PARTED
HIS RAIMENT, AND CAST LOTS.

Three men had made their painful journey from their cells. Already they had endured the mocking, jeering and beatings of the heartless soldiers.

Two of them had set out in life, but had made wrong choices that led them to this terrible day. Ahead of them lay the agony of nails piercing their thieving hands, and the feet that carried them on their wicked journeys here and there. Maybe they had lain in wait for lonely travellers like the Jew who was robbed and needed the Samaritan's help. Perhaps they had crept into houses and taken other people's food, clothing and property. Perhaps they had been like the raiders who attacked Job's servants, robbed and murdered.

Does it matter? The Bible is dogmatic, "*You shall not steal.*" But it goes further, "*You shall not covet.*" But it goes further. What kind of men ought they to have been? Even their enemies should have been prevented from loss through their acts of kindness.

Deuteronomy 22:4 "You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox fall down along the road, and hide yourself from them; you shall surely help him lift them up again.

Exodus 23:4-5 "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him."

Job could say that he had not been a selfish man: *Job 31:16 "If I have kept the poor from their desire, Or caused the eyes of the widow to fail, 17 Or eaten my morsel by myself, So that the fatherless could not eat of it 18 (But from my youth I reared him as a father, And from my mother's womb I guided the widow); 19 If I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, Or any poor man without covering; 20 If his heart has not blessed me, And if he was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep; 21 If I have raised my hand against the fatherless, When I saw I had help in the gate; 22 Then let my arm fall from my shoulder, Let my arm be torn from the socket."*

That is the kind of men they should have been. These men had turned from the scriptures. They had rejected God and saw no need of forgiveness. Their consciences were closed and, like all thieves, they were pitiless to the distress they caused others.

Think of it: you have some precious piece of jewellery from your mother, or the wedding ring your beloved husband gave you. A burglar enters and takes them. It is not the loss of the money, but the loss of the memento, the meaning, that is the cause of the grief. Thieves are heartless. In our country the idea of Robin Hood who stole from the rich and gave to the poor gives us a sinful leniency to the thief who is from a poor background, but make no mistake, these two men were two selfish and cruel men who chose theft rather than doing an honest day's work. Better to be poor than a thief.

Many years ago, Matthew Henry, a well-known Bible scholar, was once robbed of his wallet. Knowing that it was his duty to give thanks in everything, he meditated on this incident and recorded in his diary the following:

“Let me be thankful, first, because he never robbed me before; second, because although he took my purse, he did not take my life; third, because although he took all I possessed, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed.” Matthew Henry (1662-1714)

These two men are going to die. They would receive the due reward of their sins. They cannot complain, they cannot cry “Injustice!”

They may have been successful for many years, but the word of God makes a statement which has come true: *“Be sure your sin will find you out.” Proverbs 22:8 He who sows iniquity will reap sorrow.* Hosea 8:7 says, *“They sow the wind, And reap the whirlwind.”*

Well, these are two of the three men making this sorrowful journey.

But one of the three has not made those wrong choices. He has walked with God from His conception.

At His baptism God said, *“This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”* Men wanted to stone Him and he asked them, *“I have shown you many good works, for which of them do you stone me?”* They said that there was nothing in His life that was the cause of their anger. At His trial Pilate found no fault in Him. His Pilate's wife said he was a righteous man. The Jews had to find false witnesses and liars to find reason to condemn and convict Him.

Jesus could say without the slightest sense of exaggeration: *John 8:29* “*And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him.*”

This is the man who comes to the place of crucifixion and prays, “*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*”

Let us then take the lessons these words bring to us:

The first is that they are a proof that He is the Messiah. *Isaiah 53:12* *Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.*

As Christ was being numbered with the transgressors he made intercession for them. This is one of those almost unknown and rarely mentioned prophecies. We know about Bethlehem, Egypt, being denied, betrayed for 30 pieces of silver by a friend, having his hands and feet pierced, being surrounded by people like a pack of howling dogs and dying with criminals and being buried in a rich man’s tomb, but this verse is not about His ascension into heaven. It is about His death. That is the moment being spoken of.

The whole crowd has cried out, “Crucify Him.” Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod have led the injustice. Judas has opened the door to the secret arrest. Peter has cursed. The disciples have saved their own skins and run for safety. The crowd has been like Hitler’s Germans who cried “Hail Hitler!” and like sheep, gave no thought to where Hitler’s leadership would take them. The chief priests and Pharisees led the way and the crowd followed. How many had recently seen miracles, cried “*Hosanna!*” and laid palm branches under the feet of the young donkey?

The people were not only the inhabitants of Jerusalem. There were visitors from the whole Roman Empire who had come for the feast. They had all shouted the fateful words “*Crucify Him.*” “*Let Him be crucified.*”

There were also the callous soldiers. They were hammering nails into the hands of the Son of God. They would share out his possessions and then sit down and gamble for His clothes.

Each and every one was a transgressor, but He made intercession for the transgressors. He did not complain or curse. He didn’t put on a brave face and spit at them, even though they had spit at him. He did not call for legions of angels to destroy the world and set Him free.

He made intercession for the transgressors.

And this is a proof that He is the promised Saviour. It is also the beginning of His work of interceding for His people:

Hebrews 7:25 Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

The One who made intercession for the transgressors as He was being crucified is the One who is making intercession for you. He will never stop interceding. He shows His wounds and pleads your cause. All that He did on the cross may justify you, but what about your ongoing sin?

In Psalm 106 we are told that the people of God were constantly falling into various sins and backsliding. But someone rose up to intercede for them. Listen:

21 They forgot God their Saviour, Who had done great things in Egypt, 22 Wondrous works in the land of Ham, Awesome things by the Red Sea. 23 Therefore He said that He would destroy them, Had not Moses His chosen one stood before Him in the breach, To turn away His wrath, lest He destroy them.

And again,

28 They joined themselves also to Baal of Peor, And ate sacrifices made to the dead. 29 Thus they provoked Him to anger with their deeds, And the plague broke out among them. 30 Then Phinehas stood up and intervened, And the plague was stopped.

Christian friends, we also have an Intercessor. When we find ourselves slipping and sliding, forgetting and forsaking, there is someone who lay on the cross and interceded, and after His sufferings He ascended into heaven to continue that work as long as He is alive.

That is the first lesson. He is the Saviour promised by God and He cares about these murderous, callous, godless people. How much more can we, who are so troubled and grieved by sin look to the same Messiah and know that now He lives again He will always continue that work on our behalf?

These words are also an example to His people of prayer. Jesus, we know was a man of much secret prayer. He rose a great while before day to pray. He spent all night in prayer. He fasted and prayed for 40 days. But as He faced this final trial we see that He faces it with a prayerful spirit.

The last thing Jesus did for His disciples was not to preach to them, but to pray for them. Having given them one final message of comfort, he lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said... (John 17) He prayed for these weak and confused men. These men who were so sure they would never leave Him nor forsake Him needed His prayers.

Jesus could no longer preach, heal or help, but He could pray. From the upper room He went to the garden of Gethsemane and there He continued His preparation for the cross. He is now not praying for His disciples, but for Himself. *“If it is possible, let this cup pass from me, but not my will, but yours be done.”* He is not in such intense anguish at the prospect of the physical pain. Many have gone to such deaths with bravado, some have chosen death in suicide, but He is not facing mere crucifixion, but what the Bible describes as The Cross. He is to become the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world. He is to become a sacrifice that bears the wrath of God. He is to endure the Cross as a blaspheming sinner and will cry out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.”

From Gethsemane He has passed through the trial and is now at the cross. His prayerful spirit is intact. He is not like so many who say, “If you had suffered as I had suffered, you would believe in God either.” He is not saying, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

He is praying. He isn't praying for Himself or His disciples. He is praying for His enemies. He is doing what he calls us to do:

Matthew 5:44 “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.”

Let us pause to remember that what Jesus is doing is an example for us.

Some of you cannot preach or teach. Your life of ministry in the pulpit has come, or is coming, to its end. You feel useless. I heard of the greatest pilot the world has known. He was a pilot in the war, a test pilot and flew in over 400 different types of plane. Finally, he was too old to fly again. He said that it took a year to get over the withdrawal symptoms. Some of you may look back and see years of Sunday School service, helping others to mend broken things, preaching and visiting. Now those days are behind you and there stretches out before you a life of getting up, taking tablets, waiting for help, eating and sometimes long and lonely hours.

You may wonder what you can do. You can follow the example of the Lord. He prayed, even as He died. Do you have breath? Use it to pray. You may yet

accomplish far more in your days of uselessness than you did in the days of service. It is possible.

What a brief prayer this is, but look at its impact. The cruel crucifixion takes place and then He rises. He ascends into heaven and sits at the right hand of the father. Then, when the day of Pentecost had fully come the Father sent the answer. "Father, forgive them." Peter told the people that they had been guilty of crucifying the Saviour, the Holy One, and that even when Pilate was determined to release Him, they had prevented it and brought about a murder of God's Son. They are alarmed and cry out in despair, "What shall we do?" The answer comes that they should repent and go to Christ for mercy. They do, and 3000 who had 50 days earlier pleaded for His death and received it, now plead for forgiveness and receive it

This is the answer.

The prayer was so short. Stephen prayed the same, "Lay not this sin to their account." Saul is converted. But, in both cases the answer comes when they are gone to heaven.

Keep praying for that unconverted son or daughter, that friend or enemy. You may be long gone home to be with your interceding Saviour before the answers are poured out. Think of the places we have prayed for, Rochdale, North Korea, Papua New Guinea. Think of the people we have brought to the throne of grace times without number: our children, our neighbours, famous wicked men and atheists, the Queen and Royal family, careless neighbours, vicious persecutors. Think of the situations you have pleaded about, sick people, oppressed people, Christians in prison.

Keep praying because whether it is 50 days or 50 years there will be an answer eventually in the will of God. I know one prayer warrior who met with my mother for 18 mothers. She is an unknown woman named Sheila Butcher. Together they prayed until the answer came. That woman prayed for 50 years for her husband until he too came to the Saviour. My own mother prayed for my sister for 42 years, and it was only when she had gone from this world to the next that the answer came.

My mother could say no more, pray no more and plead no more, but her tears and prayers were kept in a bottle and in remembrance, and then the answer came.

These words are an example to us. Whatever the situation, take it to the Lord in prayer. Prosperity or persecution, in sickness and health, for better or worse, new life or your own death, take it to the Lord in prayer.

These words show us how to leave the world
Bitterness is such an evil. The Lord has told us:

Hebrews 12:15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled.

How many of us take a grudge through life. We don't forgive, we won't forgive, and sometimes we will say we can't forgive. If anyone had the right not to forgive it was the Lord Jesus Christ. He had the power on earth to forgive sins against God, but when it came to sins against Himself, He appealed to the Father.

What an evil a bitter spirit is. *"Forgive us our sins as we forgive others."* That is the spirit of a saved person.

James 3:11 asks, "Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?" Is it possible that you profess love to God and yet are not forbearing and forgiving to others? Is it that there is someone and you cannot even bare to hear their name?

The Mail Online reported Margaret Thatcher's death with these words:

Baroness Thatcher's death unleashed a wave of vitriol and hatred from the Left. The first of several planned 'Thatcher death parties' across the country began last night with more than 200 revellers gathering in Brixton, south London. They danced the conga, drank champagne and chanted:
'Maggie, Maggie, Maggie - Dead, Dead, Dead.

You may read that with horror and yet feel happier, if not happy when you hear of someone who has hurt you getting into trouble. You may be able to live like that, but do not die with that attitude unresolved. Begin now with prayer that says, "I forgive because the Father forgave..."

Paul writes: *Ephesians 4:31 Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.*

Sort it out, have done with it. Look at Christ at Calvary and agree what a beautiful thing it is to listen as He surveys this malicious crowd, and then imitate His spirit:

Let me look at the crowd as my Saviour did,
till my eyes with tears grow dim;
Let me look till I pity the wandering sheep,
and love them, for love of Him.

The Bible says that the unconverted have mouths full of bitterness and cursing. This is the opposite of Christ. Cursing is praying for evil to happen to someone. It is wishing them harm. The only bitterness that should be in our hearts is that which Peter had when he caught sight of Christ and felt His sin and failure and went out and wept bitterly over his own failure.

Make sure as you live and die that you love all the brethren and do not leave this world without dealing with the resentments that do so easily settle in the heart.

The ones who falsely accused Him are included in the prayer. The Roman soldiers who have already punched him and lashed Him are included. The crowd of stupid, ignorant, thoughtless sheep are included.

So, here we are at the Cross and we are listening. The first words we hear are, "*Father, forgive them.*" These people had no idea of the gravity of their sin. They were crucifying the Lord of glory. They were punishing the only innocent man. They were allowing others to lead them to hell. They were committing the greatest sin the world has ever known.

As we listen we learn.

We learn that this Man is the Messiah. His prayer is one more evidence that He is the Saviour. He is interceding for the transgressors. And this leads us to know that what was begun there, continues to this day. We do not have Moses to plead for us, or Phineas, but we have Jesus who always lives to make intercession for us. We may do some very bad things as believers and be complete fools, but there is a Man in heaven who gave Himself for us, and now He is interceding for us as He did at Calvary, "*Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.*"

We learn to pray. No matter what we face we can face it as He did, in prayer and in a prayerful spirit. We may be useless, and merely waiting for death as He was, yet we can continue in prayer. We can pray without ceasing, and we can even go to our graves with unanswered prayers looking to the One who answers exceedingly, abundantly above what we ask or think.

We learn to forgive. We learn to die well. "Lord, open the king of England's eyes." said the martyr. *Father forgive. Lay not this sin to their charge. You meant it for evil, God meant it for good.*

What help we will find as we sit down and watch Him there at Calvary, and listen to these words that come from His lips. How they help and encourage us as we live in the same terrible, unjust, god-hating, Christian oppressing world.

2.

LUKE 23:43 AND JESUS SAID TO HIM, “ASSUREDLY, I SAY TO YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE.”

Last time we heard the Lord say, “*Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.*” (Luke 23:34) We focussed on the evidence that He is the Messiah who made intercession then and there for the transgressors. He gave us an example of prayer, and of forgiveness.

But in that prayer He also displayed His mercy. As God, He had the authority on earth to forgive sins, but as He lay on the Cross, He is there as a substitute, as a man, and as such, as man, He asks His Father to show mercy and forgive.

What is wicked man’s greatest need? It is the forgiveness of God. He is a sinner who has fallen short of the glory of God. God is glorious, and Man is made in His glorious image, but Man does not display the glory of God. He doesn’t live up to it. God is righteous and Man is a criminal against His laws. God is holy and Man has provoked Him to anger by His defiance, rebellion, and lack of love for God and other human beings.

What is wicked Man’s greatest need? It is the forgiveness which only God can give.

Last week we watched in our mind’s eyes as two criminals made their last journey in this world. Their hands could no longer steal and would soon be fixed in place by large nails. Their greedy eyes no longer longed for others’ possessions. The only thing they could now covet was life itself.

Elizabeth I is reputed to have said, “All my possessions for a moment of time.”

Voltaire, the most influential atheist of Europe in his day, has various sayings reputed to be his last. Among them are that he cried out with his dying breath: “I am abandoned by God and man; I shall go to hell! I will give you half of what I am worth, if you will give me six months life.”

Thomas Hobbes, the political philosopher and sceptic who corrupted some of England’s great men: “If I had the whole world, I would give anything to live one day. I shall be glad to find a hole to creep out of the world at. I am about to take a fearful leap in the dark!”

M.F. Rich: “Terrible horrors hang over my soul! I have given my immortality for gold; and its weight sinks me into a hopeless, helpless Hell!”

These two thieves have loved to take what they want, but I suspect they would give anything to live.

They hear the Lord ask for forgiveness for those who were guilty of His death. What is the crowd's response? How do the people react? Luke 23:35 tells us that even after His prayer the soldiers sat down callously to gamble for His cloak. And the people (passively, unmoved,) stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, "*He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God.*"

The first words from the cross, "Father forgive them," teach us about mercy. These next words are an expression of grace—saving grace.

My message is a question:

What do these words teach us about saving grace?

There is common grace and saving grace. The two are distinct.

WHAT IS COMMON GRACE?

It's a good question, because God is good to the world. God's goodness to all mankind is often called His common grace. He has not left Himself without a witness to His common grace. But, common grace is not saving grace. God gives life, and breath and every good thing. Law and Order, health and healing, marriage and family, work, rest and play, seedtime and harvest, sun and rain, beauty and humour, music and laughter. These may all be experiences of common grace, but common grace is that kindness shown to all, and yet not even that is shown equally to all.

WHAT IS SAVING GRACE?

But saving grace is something far above common grace. What do these words, "Assuredly, I say to you, today, you will be with Me in Paradise", teach us about saving grace?

Saving grace is planned

Nothing, in relation to saving grace, happens by accident. Ruth happened to go to pick ears of corn. She went one way not another. She ended up at Boaz's field not another. He happened to be there. He happened to notice her. The rest is history. It was not accidental, it was providential. It was not fortunate, it was foreordained. It was part of a Divine plan.

The word of God declares this: *Psalms 37:23 The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, And He delights in his way.*

But it also says this: *Proverbs 16:9 A man's heart plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps. It continues: Proverbs 19:21 There are many plans in a man's heart, Nevertheless the LORD'S counsel – that will stand.* Jeremiah understood this when he prayed: *Jeremiah 10:23 O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps.*

Why did the woman of Samaria come to the well at the time she did? Why was the Ethiopian Chancellor reading from exactly the part of Isaiah he was when Philip was told to go up to the chariot? Why did Naaman attack the Jews and among his captives, decide to take the little Jewish child? They all had their reasons, which I am sure they could explain and show their own decision-making process, and why did the thieves plan that last theft? What led to their capture? Did they leave evidence? Were they too slow in escaping?

Human answers can be given, but these answers ignore one vital issue. God has a plan.

Why was Christ walking up that road to Calvary on exactly that day? Listen: *Acts 2:23 "Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death.* Yes, there were human plans, taken in secret rooms, with whispered malice and money changing hands. But there was another council meeting which took place long before when the three glorious Persons of the Holy Trinity determined from all eternity that this exact path would be trodden, and it was part of the plan of saving grace.

Why did Pilate make that fatal decision? *Proverbs 21:1 The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.*

And so it is with your life. You may try to work it out: why were you born now? Why did you make those choices about career, relationships, money, where to live, and so on? Why was there a postal strike between January and March 1971 while I was a Policeman? Why was I sent to Ampthill rather than being kept in Bedford? Why did Alan Folkes happen to be the one who walked in? Why did I say yes to his invitation? Why had they just begun a series of studies on the 5 doctrines of grace? Why had I not been invited a week earlier to the one on Total Depravity rather than the second one on Unconditional Election?

The answer is simple: *Proverbs 20:24 A man's steps are of the LORD; How then can a man understand his own way?* We are left to know that God has a plan and our lives are part of that plan. We act freely and are accountable, but He acts sovereignly. Even those chance meetings and accidental happenings are included.

The traffic jam and the doctor's diagnosis, the sparrow falling to the ground and the redundancy notice, the unkind remark and the marriage proposal are all within His plan.

We conclude with Nebuchadnezzar (*Daniel 4:35*) *All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven And among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand Or say to Him, "What have You done?"*

These two thieves were successful until they were caught. They happened to be caught at this time, and tried and convicted. There happened to be another trial at the same time, and as it was the Passover someone should be released, but it was neither of them. They just simply did not have the charisma. Barabbas just happened to be there as well and was a notable criminal. He was famous. He led an insurrection. Jesus never led an insurrection, instead, He said, *"Give what is Caesar's to Caesar, and to God what is God's."* The Jews chose the heroic rebel. The two thieves were nobodies. They were also-rans, they were not the main cast. They were simply the 'extras'.

However, everything about this day of grace is planned, even the presence of these two seemingly insignificant thieves.

Others had urged Christ to do various things at various times, but He said, *"The time has not yet come."* But just before this scene Jesus had declared, *"The time has come..."* The Saviour's death had been planned from all eternity. He is *'the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world.'* (*Revelation 13:8*) Titus 1 begins: *1 Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness; 2 In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began.*

God promised to send Christ before there was time or space or matter. 1 Peter 1 says the same: *18 you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. 20 He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you last times for you.*

Christ knew it was planned: Luke 22:22 *"And truly the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!"*

The early preachers knew it: Acts 2:23 *“Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;*

It was planned. But like every good plan, it was planned in every detail, and one of those details of grace involved the two thieves. Listen to Isaiah 53:

8 ... He was cut off from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My people He was stricken. 9 And they made His grave with the wicked – But with the rich at His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was any deceit in His mouth.

Should you not worship God, this God, this ‘Sovereign Ruler of the skies, ever gracious, ever wise.’ I do not often read a complete hymn, but I intend to now to make the point.

Sovereign ruler of the skies!
Ever gracious ever wise!
All our times are in Your hands
Ordered by Your wise commands.

His decrees who formed the earth,
Fixed my first and second birth;
Parents, native-place, and time,
All appointed were by Him.

You, Who formed me by Your power;
You will guide me, hour by hour;
All my times shall ever be
Ordered by Your wise decree:

Times of sickness and of health;
Times of poverty and wealth;
Times of trial and of grief,
Times of triumph and relief;

Times the tempter’s power to prove;
Times to taste the Saviour’s love:
All must come, and last, and end,
As shall please our heavenly Friend.

He is gracious, wise, and just,
In His hands our lives we trust:

We and ours are all His own,
May His holy will be done.

You, at all times, will we bless;
Having You, we all possess.
Pleased or pained by sovereign grace
Till we see Your glorious face.

Plagues and deaths around me fly;
Till he bids, I cannot die;
Not one single arrow hit,
Till the God of love sees fit.

Saving grace is planned, but there is more.

Saving grace is personal

The Lord said, *“Today, you will be with me.”* The ‘you’ is not plural, it is singular. ‘One of you.’ ‘You,’ that is, ‘not him, and not them.’

There are reasons for this. It is not because one of the thieves was more noble than the other. We believe in Total Depravity. Each of these men was in the same condition. They were both thieves, both cursing Christ, both a few hours from death. Neither deserved anything.

Abel was no better than Cain, Moses no better than Pharaoh, Jacob was as bad as Esau, Peter no better than Judas. They were ruined and polluted through and through. Their understanding, affections, wills and consciences were thoroughly corrupted. It is true that one sinner may be a murderer and another a hypocrite, one may be scandalous and the other civilised, one may fiddle his tax and another may steal from Lidl. But all have sinned. There is none righteous, no not one. We are all dead in trespasses and sins. There is no one that does good.

These two thieves are treading the same path, but grace has brought them to draw their last breaths dying on a cross next to the only one who can save them.

You see, we do not only believe in Total Depravity, we also believe in Unconditional Election. Neither man was better than the other, but grace had made a difference between them. What a mystery the teaching of the Bible about these things is. The words election and predestination appear so many times in the Bible, and yet somehow they are seen as inventions of men like Augustine, Calvin, the Puritans, Whitfield, and Spurgeon rather than a revelation by God of the fact that grace is personal.

Jesus believed it! John 15:16 *“You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.*

Paul wrote: Ephesians 1:4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love.

And again: 2 Thessalonians 2:13 But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth,

Is this election personal? *Romans 16:13 Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine.* Yes! Rufus was chosen personally, just as this dying thief was. The Lord, as our good shepherd, (John 10:3) *calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*

If we are all equally dead, blind, lost, helpless, and guilty, then it has to be by grace that we are saved, not by works. It is not what is done *to* us, or done *by* us, but what is done *for* us. It is by grace, and it is by personal grace.

We also believe in a personal atonement, some call it limited atonement or particular redemption. Yes, we believe that Christ’s death is of infinite value. His death is sufficient to deal with an infinite number of sinners, committing an infinite number of infinitely evil sins, but that is not the point. No one disputes that point. The issue is whether Christ went to the Cross and lay down His life for each and every sinner. If He did, then each and every sinner’s sins are paid for. God is just and therefore He must justify each and every sinner because their punishment is paid.

The prophecy declares by contrast, *‘For the transgressions of my people was He stricken.’ (Isaiah 53:8)* That is it.

The apostle Paul put it this way, *“The Son of God loved me, and gave Himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)*

But we also believe in irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints. These are the 5 great doctrines of grace that tell us that salvation is planned, personal and it is also powerful.

Saving grace is powerful

That morning two thieves woke up and went out with no other prospect than death. How many brave atheists have lost their courage as death approaches!

Thomas Payne said, “What will become of me hereafter?”

Voltaire cried out, "I am abandoned by God and man." To his doctor he said, "I will give you half of what I am worth if you will give me six months' life." Dr. Fochin told him it could not be done. He then said, "Then I shall die and go to hell!" His nurse said: "For all the money in Europe I wouldn't want to see another unbeliever die! All night long he cried for forgiveness."

Robert Ingersoll believed that the God of the Bible was a hateful invention, and that the kindest thing that could be said about John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards were that they were insane to love a sovereign God, yet as he died, he is reported to have cried out: "O God, if there be a God, save my soul, if I have a soul!"

These two thieves began the day with no other prospect than death. Every step took them nearer the inevitable, they had no escape plan, no prospects, and no miracle escape in view.

And so, in the insanity of the inevitable, they join in with the crowd and with bravado and blasphemy they curse Jesus Christ.

However, there *is* a miracle. There is an escape. Luke 23:39 records that "*Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, 'If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.'*" As this one speaks the other stops doing what they had both had been doing previously. Mark 15:32 tells us that the crowd was sneeringly saying, "*Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe.*" And he adds, *Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him.*

Both had been taunting Christ, but something has happened. One of the thieves listens to his partner in crime and speaks. Luke 23:40 *But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?"*

Something has happened within him. Grace is powerful. Grace is working. Grace is not a passive thing it is a powerful thing.

We can see four evidences of grace. Four things have changed because of the power of grace in the heart.

HIS VIEW OF GOD HAS CHANGED: Do you not fear God? God was real and the thought of God filled him with fear. There is no fear of God before their eyes, is said of the unsaved man. But here is an evidence of grace.

HIS VIEW OF SIN HAS CHANGED: Seeing we are in the same condemnation, and we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward for our sins. He is not making excuses. He sees no escape. He accepts the human verdict and the divine verdict.

Recently, a young woman stopped speaking to her grandfather. He had told her she was a sinner and needed to get right with God or her sins would carry her to judgment. She was so distressed and kept insisting that she was not a bad person. Others told her she was a good person. She was so upset that she went to a local vicar who said she should not worry. She was not a bad person. God would not condemn her. I have read many people's stories of how they came to know the Lord. Without exception one of the greatest changes was in their view of themselves as sinners. They view themselves as needing pardon or they will go to judgment and find themselves completely lost eternally

HIS VIEW OF CHRIST HAS CHANGED: Grace has opened his eyes. He is looking at the same man and yet seeing a quite different person.

He no longer sees a loser, he sees the Lord, not a criminal, He is a king; not a sinner, He sees a saviour. How could he grasp this in those hours and minutes on the cross? The prophet Isaiah tells us. Isaiah 53:1 *"Who has believed our report?"* The fact is that some have believed it. Who then does believe? The answer follows. *"And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed."* That is it. God has revealed it to them. That is why they believe. Grace has changed their view of Christ. Matthew 16:17 gives Jesus' answer to Peter when he declares that he believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God: Jesus answered and said to him, *"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven."*

That is what has happened to this man.

THE FOURTH CHANGE IS THIS: HE ASKED GOD FOR HELP. He prayed. How many others have done this: *Have mercy upon me, O God, blot out my transgressions. God, be merciful to me the sinner. Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. Save me.*

Please notice: he knew he could do nothing to make amends. He could not return the stolen goods. He could not work and pay back the debt.

How true that hard as it is to make people feel their guilt, once they do they try to do something themselves to alleviate the feeling.

This saving faith expresses itself in these ways, but listen to what he is saying: he is testifying of Christ before a mocking world. Everyone else is against Christ. He is now for Him. Every other voice criticizes. His voice confesses. Every other voice accuses the dying Messiah, he accepts him.

But what made the change in this man?

IT WAS NOT POWERFUL PROVIDENCES: there were no signs and wonders, healings and miracles. He was saved before the divine darkness covered the earth. He knew nothing of the veil in the temple being torn from top to bottom by the divine hand.

IT WAS NOT POWERFUL PREACHING: the only messages about the Messiah he could hear were those of wicked men. Three things kept being repeated: If you are the Son of God... If you are the King of Israel... save yourself and come down from the cross... Son of God, King of Israel, save YOURSELF.

IT WAS POWERFUL GRACE THAT SAVED HIM. The Holy Spirit takes those words of wicked men and drives them home. "Son of God, King of Israel, don't save yourself, save me."

He says:

Lord... that is who the Son of God is.

When you come into your kingdom... that is who this King is and where He is going.

Remember me... save me, do not forget me.

He hadn't read books on theology. The only thing we can be sure he had read was a tract written in three languages and pinned above the Cross: *Luke 23:38 And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. Or, Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.* That is not a lot of words, but they were enough. The poor preachers deridingly repeating their cries and appeals, and the short tract above the head. But we are saved by GRACE, through faith. We are saved by the power of God through faith... This grace uses such meagre means as preaching from the worst of men and messages from the mocking Pilate to reach into the heart of a man.

Grace is powerful. A man rises with no thought of being saved. Before him lies an absolute certainty of death and hell, but grace intervenes and death is but the doorway to eternal happiness, as Anne Bronte put it.

Hudson Taylor picked up a tract with no intention of reading anything but the interesting story. He had no desire to be saved, quite the opposite, but by the time he was finished reading that simple, short piece of literature he was thoroughly converted.

The Primitive Methodist preacher who repeated his text and could only point the finger at Spurgeon and say, “Young man, you look miserable, look to Jesus Christ and live.”

Saul was travelling to kill Christians. One moment He hated Jesus of Nazareth and within moments all was changed.

There is no preparation. I have heard many people speak of those who are showing interest, or in whom there are good signs, but none of this is evidence of grace. The gospel may be received with joy and rejected with jeers shortly after.

We sing a hymn, “Amazing grace”. Remember what it says:

T’was Grace that taught my heart to fear.

And Grace, my fears relieved.

C H Spurgeon tells this story: Mr. Thorpe was a member of an 'infidel' club. In those days infidelity was more blasphemous than now. This infidel society took the name of the “Hell Fire Club”. Among their amusements was that of holding imitations of religious services, and exhibiting mimicries of popular ministers. Thorpe went to hear George Whitfield preach, that he might caricature him before his profane associates. He listened to Whitfield so carefully that he caught his tones and his manner, and somewhat of his doctrines.

When the “Hell Fire Club” met to see his caricature of Whitfield, Thorpe opened the Bible that he might take a text to preach from it after the manner of Whitfield. His eye fell on the passage, “Except you repent, you shall all likewise perish.” As he spoke upon that text he was carried beyond himself, lost all thought of mockery, spoke as one in earnest, and was the means of his own conversion!

As we look at the Cross we see Christ at His weakest and Man at His worst, but grace is powerful enough in this weak Christ to save the worst of men. As we look at the Cross we see a helpless Christ and a hopeless man, yet the grace of Christ at His most helpless is powerful enough to rescue a man at his most hopeless.

The Bible tells us again and again that God is able to do so much, anything He wishes:

He is able to save

He is able to sanctify

He is able to subdue

He is able to keep

Think of the worst, most hardened sinner, the most unlikely convert, the least thoughtful worldling. Grace is powerful. Who would ever have put Manasseh or Nebuchadnezzar or Saul of Tarsus on his list of likely converts? Yet they all came to repentance. Why? Grace is powerful.

Saving grace is permanent

The final lesson today from this second saying of Jesus from the Cross is that grace is permanent. Philippians 1:6 says, *“being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”*

This man asked a dying Saviour for mercy. The response was a personal promise of grace.

The words of Jesus answer four simple questions:

WHO? Who will be saved? “You will be...” He will not be, but you will be saved. You have asked, you have believed and you will be saved. Whoever calls upon the Lord will be saved. It is not potential salvation, it is not possible salvation, it is promised. It is permanent.

WHERE? Where is that kingdom to which Christ is going, and where I wish to be? You will be with me in Paradise. This word Paradise means a garden.

Remember, there was a Garden in Eden. It was a paradise on earth. There was no sin and no suffering.

There was also a garden at Calvary. *John 19:41 Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.* Near that place of death there was another garden, but that was not the garden the thief was being taken to. His body would be cast out to the Valley of Hinnom.

The Bible speaks of the Paradise of God. There is another garden spoken of in Revelation and Jesus promises that this garden of paradise is where the dying and repentant thief will go.

THE THIRD QUESTION THESE WORDS ANSWER IS 'WHEN?' Does this man have to spend time annihilated as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists believe? Will he go into some soul-sleep, which many who reject the teaching of hell believe will happen to believers? Will he go to purgatory to be purged of some of his sins? Will he have to wait millennia before going to be with Christ?

No! "Today, you will be with me." To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. To be with Christ is far better. We put off this temporary tent and go to be with Him.

THE FINAL QUESTION IS "WHY?" Why is he saved? Why can he be sure he is saved? The answer is simply this, "Truly, I say to you." It is the authoritative word of Jesus Christ. Eighty times in the Gospels this authoritative word is recorded from the lips of Jesus. It is almost impossible to stress just how emphatic the Greek word translated as amen, verily, truly or assuredly is.

You may not know that it is directly related to the Hebrew word for 'believe'. It is probably the most universal word in the world. How does the Persian say, "Amen"? Or the German, French or Arab? But when Jesus used it, it was not a mere beginning or ending of a phrase. It meant, "Believe it! It's true! It is trustworthy! Trust it!"

This man was not going to heaven because the priest said so. It was not because he had made amends for a life of crime. Grace is permanent because it is based in the authoritative promise of God. *My sheep hear my voice, and I give to them eternal life, and they shall never perish, either shall any man pluck them out of my hand.* (John 10:27-28)

As we conclude, let me again ask if you know anything of this saving grace?

Your salvation was planned, if you have trusted Christ as Lord and Saviour. Your path, like that thief's led you to Christ. Christ's death was in the plan. He was numbered with the transgressors. Think of the journey you made. You met certain people, you heard certain things, you made decisions, you took actions. You were not necessarily looking, searching or seeking, but there came a time when instead of cursing, or instead of carelessness there came concern.

Your salvation was personal. The whole issue was within you. Your concern was for yourself. Others were not bothered, but you were bothered.

Your salvation was powerful. What power is exerted when anyone is born again? It is the power of God. It is that power that raised up Jesus Christ. It affects you so

profoundly that you begin to fear God, regret and repent of sin, desire Christ and see Him in a completely different way as Lord and Saviour, and finally, it makes you pray for mercy.

Your salvation is permanent. It is based on the unbreakable promise of the one who cannot lie.

Have you come sorrowing and sighing to Christ? You will be with Him. He assures you it is so. You can say that you know the one you have put your trust in, and are persuaded that he is able to keep even you. No one is able to snatch them from his hand. We are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.

None who were given to Him by the Father, for whom He has lived, died, risen, ascended and interceded will ever perish.

Philip Dodderidge wrote the hymn that we end with:

Grace, 'tis a charming sound,
Harmonious to my ear;
Heaven with the echo shall resound,
And all the earth shall hear.
Saved by grace alone, grace my only plea
I can sing with thankful heart that Jesus died for me.

Grace first designed the way
To save rebellious man;
And all the steps that grace display
complete the wondrous plan.

That Grace first wrote my name
In God's eternal book;
This grace then gave me to the Lamb,
Who all my sorrows took.

Grace led my wandering feet
To tread the heavenly road;
And new supplies of grace I meet,
While pressing on to God.

Grace taught my soul to pray
And made my tears o'erflow;
His grace has kept me to this day,
And will not let me go.

Grace all the work shall crown,
Through everlasting days;
It lays in heaven the topmost stone,
And well deserves the praise.

O let Your grace inspire
My soul to love Your ways;
May all my life be lived for You
from now to endless days.

Rejoice in sovereign and saving grace. Look at these three sad figures and know this: in just a few moments two of them will be together forever. One deserves the highest place that heaven affords. The other deserves the lowest hell. But, sovereign and saving grace has planned salvation for that man and soon it will come to its moment. Jesus said “The time has come when the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of wicked men.” But He can also say, “The time has come when a wicked man is delivered into the hands of the Son of Man.”

The greatest part of that saying are the words, “you will be **with Me...**” Forever with the Lord. The hymn says it. The greatest blessing of all is not to be absent from pain, to be absent from sin and suffering, but to be present with the Lord.

Glory in God. Glory in grace. Your salvation is to the praise of the glory of His grace.

3.

JOHN 19: 25 NOW THERE STOOD BY THE CROSS OF JESUS HIS MOTHER, AND HIS MOTHER’S SISTER, MARY THE WIFE OF CLOPAS, AND MARY MAGDALENE. 26 WHEN JESUS THEREFORE SAW HIS MOTHER, AND THE DISCIPLE WHOM HE LOVED STANDING BY, HE SAID TO HIS MOTHER, “WOMAN, BEHOLD YOUR SON!” 27 THEN HE SAID TO THE DISCIPLE, “BEHOLD YOUR MOTHER!” AND FROM THAT HOUR THAT DISCIPLE TOOK HER TO HIS OWN HOME.

How difficult this passage is to preach on. We can be so focused on the suffering Son of God that we do not see the suffering mother of Jesus. However, one person did see her. Jesus saw His mother.

Let us look at her for a moment and enter into the human situation and seek to take valuable personal lessons from it.

Promise: Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23; Luke 1:26-27

To understand why the word *promise* is important we go back to the days of Adam and Eve.

Eve had been led astray, but to her is given the honour of beginning Redemption's story. *Genesis 3:14 So the LORD God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, You are cursed more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you shall go, And you shall eat dust All the days of your life. 15 And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel."* Do you see it? The Seed of the woman will come. The Messiah is not viewed as the Seed of Adam, but of Eve. The promised Saviour will be special. And so it is that throughout the Old Testament, and even with the conception of John the Baptist, miraculously conceived children prefigure the promised Saviour until the prophecy and promise comes to its fulfilment with the words: "A virgin shall conceive."

And as Isaiah's prophecy is penned we see why the promised mother will be a virgin. It is because the one who is to be conceived is Immanuel, God with us. A few hundred words later he adds: *Isaiah 9:6 For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* The mother is Eve, but there is no earthly father. Instead, the true Father of the Son of God is God. As to His divine nature, God is His Father. As to His human nature, Mary is His mother.

But why was it so vital that He be born of a woman, yet not conceived by a man? Paul tells us in *Galatians 4:4 But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law.* He has a human nature, but not inherited a sinful nature from Adam. He is the last Adam.

It is a wonderful thing that through 4000 years of murder and mayhem, lies and lusts, chaos and carnage, when the fullness of the time had come God's great plan took its major step forward and God was manifest in the flesh.

Everything was in place. The major things were in place. Daniel had foretold the demise of Babylon and the rise of the Persians, the demise of the Persians and the rise of Greece and the demise of the Greece and the rise of Rome.

The **small** things were in place. A young woman had been born. She was engaged to a young man and their place of birth was Bethlehem. This insignificant village was not their present home town. But the big and the little things come together when Augustus Caesar decrees that everyone should return to their birthplace to be registered for taxation purposes.

As the fullness of the time came, God became man. This is what God had promised. No mere man was sufficient for the task and so God would come to the rescue. Isaiah wrote: *Isaiah 59:16 He saw that there was no man, And wondered that there was no intercessor; Therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him; And His own righteousness, it sustained Him.* The eternal Son of God came to bring salvation.

He never stopped being fully God. He became man by addition. He had a human spirit and a human body. He was fully man with emotions, mind and will. He had a conscience and lived by faith in His Father. He was made in all points like us, yet without sin.

And at the cross, this God-Man is doing what He came to do. Yes, He had been betrayed by a friend according to the promise. The promised thirty pieces of silver had exchanged hands. His hands and feet had been pierced, just as David promised. But why had He been born as Man and born under the duty to keep the whole Law? He had come: *Galatians 4:5 to redeem those who were under the law.*

Mary is looking up and standing near the promised Messiah, and yet, I suspect that was not the foremost thing in her mind. She was looking at her son. He was in agony. She could see the mutilated face from the beating. She could see the blood and could watch the anguished lifting of his body on nail pierced feet. She is looking at the promised Saviour, but the scene before her must tend to hide all those promises of a Redeemer from view.

For us this scene is in the past. For her it was in the present. For us we see resurrection, she sees writhing and hears the ridicule. We see future ascension, she sees present agony. We see One here and now living in glory. She sees One there and then dying in ignominy.

Yet God is in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, but she cannot see it. Her tears are a veil to the glory of this moment of agony and anguish for Christ

John tells us *John 12:41 These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him.* Yet John is recording not only a scene of His glory on the throne, he declares that Isaiah saw *the glory* of the Cross. He write: *37 But although He had*

done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, 38 that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: "Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" This is a quotation from Isaiah 53. Isaiah could see what Mary and other eyes at Calvary could not see clearly. This was a moment of glory. Never was Christ more pleasing to the Father than when He gave Himself as a substitutionary sacrifice.

The Son of God had humbled Himself and become obedient unto death, even the death of the cross, and, because of that glorious humility and suffering, God has highly exalted Him and given Him a name which is above every other name. My friends, the three Mary's might not see it. John may not have seen it at the time, but after the resurrection the Holy Spirit brought this scene to his remembrance, and with it the eyes of his understanding were opened. Isaiah had seen this day just as he had seen Christ on the throne, so he saw Him on the cross - and both scenes were scenes displaying the infinite glory of the eternal Son of God.

Mary was also a fulfilment of a promise. She was a part of the fulfilment of this scene of blood and hatred. She is not the Saviour. She is not a Mediatrix. She is not the substitutionary sacrifice, but she is standing beside the cross and watching the physical anguish of her son.

A prayer attributed to Ephrem the Syrian in the 4th century calls her "after the mediator, you (Mary) are the mediatrix of the whole world" In the 5th century by Basil of Seleucia used it. By the 8th century the title Mediatrix was in common use. It continued to grow in the Middle Ages and Bernard of Clairvaux (12th century), Bonaventure and Bernardino of Siena (15th century) frequently employed it. In the 13th century Thomas Aquinas noted that while Jesus Christ alone can be the *perfect mediator* between God and humankind, this does not hinder that others may be called mediators, in some respect, between God and man, because they assist and prepare union between God and man. The Council of Trent declared "that the saints, who reign together with Christ, offer up their own prayers to God for men; that it is good and useful suppliantly to invoke them, and to have recourse to their prayers, aid, (and) help for obtaining benefits from God, through His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is our alone Redeemer and Saviour; but that they think impiously, who deny that the saints, who enjoy eternal happiness in heaven, are to be invocated; or who assert either that they do not pray for men; or, that the invocation of them to pray for each of us even in particular, is idolatry; or, that it is repugnant to the word of God; and is opposed to the honour of the one mediator of God and men, Christ Jesus; or, that it is foolish to supplicate, vocally, or mentally, those who reign in heaven." The reliance on the

intercession of Mary grew and reached its height in the writings of Louis de Montfort and Alphonsus Liguori in the 18th century. Louis de Montfort's approach (which later influenced Pope John Paul II) emphasized that Mary is the natural path to approaching Jesus, due to the special relationship she has with him. This reliance on the intercession of Mary is based on the general Montfortean formula: "...to do all our actions by Mary, with Mary, in Mary and for Mary so that we may do them all the more perfectly by Jesus, with Jesus, in Jesus and for Jesus..."

Pope John Paul II used the title *Mediatrix* a number of times and in his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* wrote:

"The maternal role of Mary towards people in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power": It is mediation in Christ. ...Mary's mediation is intimately linked with her motherhood...through this fullness of grace and supernatural life she was especially predisposed to cooperation with Christ, the one Mediator of human salvation. And such cooperation is precisely this mediation subordinated to the mediation of Christ.

Look at this woman standing beside the Cross. She is a helpless widow. She is utterly dependent on her Son. She can do nothing of herself. The dying thief does not appeal to her for mercy. He doesn't ask her to intercede with Christ for her. You will look in vain for any reference to her from The Acts through the epistles to the final close of Scripture's revelation. She says nothing at the Cross. No "Father forgive them", no "Today you will be with my Son in Paradise," no "My God, My God, why have you also forsaken me, Jesus' mother?" Friends, today the vast majority of those who say they are Christian exalt Mary above the Saviour. At the heart of their worship is the adoration of Mary, prayers to Mary, shrines to Mary, candles lit before her statue and viewing Christ as a pathetic figure or a stern figure. Mary is the amazing, willing person who persuades the less willing Son. She is the one who channels grace from Christ. My friends this is blasphemy. She is, to them, the Queen of Heaven through whom, by whom and in whom grace comes from Christ to the sinner.

What an insult this error is to the dying Saviour. She may be suffering as a mother, but He is suffering as a Mediator. Remember this: Jesus is the fulfilment of the promise to send a Saviour. He is the promised one, but Mary, like Judas, the scared disciples, the thieves, the rich man who gave his tomb, the mocking crowd and the nails are merely details that confirm who the Promised Messiah is.

Purity

The second word to help us grasp the significance of this scene is the word **purity**.

Listen to the Word of God as it records the moment when the angel announced the coming Messiah:

Luke 1: 26 Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" 29 But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. 30 Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. 33 And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." 34 Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" 35 And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God ... 37 For with God nothing will be impossible."

Isn't it wonderful that a young woman could grow up and come to an age of marriage and yet be pure and clean from the world? Joseph hadn't taken advantage of her. These are two sinners, yes. But they are also two believers. They haven't said, "Well, we're getting married anyway." Oh, how vital it is that a generation of morally pure young people grow up. How glorious when two people can come to marriage and have not experimented with sex. How wonderful when there are no regrets, no secrets to be kept from a husband or wife. How wonderful when there is no past sexual relationship, no prostitute and no pornography. How wonderful when no matter which of your former friends you meet there is no embarrassment.

Not every woman in the line of Christ is like Mary.

Matthew 1:1 The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham:

THE FIRST WOMAN MENTIONED IN THE GENEALOGY IS TAMAR. Matthew 1:3 *Judah begot Perez and Zerah by Tamar.* You know the story. Judah did not provide for Tamar and so she posed as a prostitute. Widowed Judah paid for sex outside marriage and then would have executed Tamar for having sex outside marriage. Yet from that confusion and corruption comes the continuing line of the Saviour.

THE SECOND WOMAN MENTIONED IS RAHAB: *5 Salmon begot Boaz by Rahab.*

This woman was a prostitute. It is no good, as some try to do, to say she was a hotel keeper. The New Testament repeats the description using the word for a prostitute. This doesn't seem to be promising, but we note that she believed God and was utterly transformed. So wonderful was the transformation in her life that she married a godly man and their son is one of the most gloriously godly and lovely characters in all of Holy Scripture. Her past was not the measure of her future.

THE THIRD WOMAN IN THE LIST IS RUTH: *Boaz begot Obed by Ruth, Obed begot Jesse, 6 and Jesse begot David the king.* This is totally different. Ruth was a Moabitess. Her first husband had been a backslider who had married her, and yet she too had been so transformed that again, some of the most beautiful words in all scripture drop from her newly converted lips: *Ruth 1:16 But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, Or to turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, And your God, my God. 17 Where you die, I will die, And there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, If anything but death parts you and me."* Oh that all converts had this glorious commitment and determination to follow Christ and His people wherever they went and whatever difficulties they would face. Their son, Obed is the grandfather of David. This man is a major step forward in the coming of the promised Messiah, and yet he makes a catastrophic choice.

THE NEXT WOMAN IN THE LIST IS AN ADULTERESS. Her name is not recorded in this list, she is simply described as *her that had been the wife of Uriah the Hittite.* Married to such a loyal, believing, principled man who was a greater man than David himself. I am not minimising David's wickedness, but we are considering the lives of the women named in the Messiah's genealogy before Mary. *David the king begot Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah.* If you have any idea that your failures and your sins, and your shortcomings, and even your scandalous mistakes somehow ruin God's promised plan to bring Christ to the world *through your words, actions and testimony*, in such a way that some of His elect people will be missed, read these words of the women in the genealogy of the Messiah. It is not a list of pure and spotless women. A woman who takes the law into her own hands and conceives. A converted prostitute, a converted Moabitess, a repenting adulteress. What a list!

But, for the Saviour to come it must be a pure and spotless young woman. A woman where it cannot be suggested for a moment that there was any impropriety: *16 And Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ.* At last Mary is born and as a godly and innocent woman, most likely in her late teens, still morally pure she is betrothed to Joseph.

That is the second word: **purity**.

Privilege

The third word is **privilege**. Mary stands before her suffering firstborn Son. It's all the wrong way round. A parent should not have to bury their child. It is unnatural, and yet even the first woman had to bury a son murdered by another son.

Yet Mary had been *highly favoured among women*. It is natural for a woman to want to bear a child and nurse that child, but it is supernatural for her to bear a child as Mary did.

Every child is a gift of God. People think it is almost a right to have children, but it isn't. It is a responsibility—that is true. But it is also a gift of God's grace. Rachel was full of anger and envy when she did not conceive. She did not quietly take her natural longing to the Lord. Instead: *Genesis 30:1-2 Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister, and said to Jacob, "Give me children, or else I die!" And Jacob's anger was aroused against Rachel, and he said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"*

Truly: *Psalms 127:3 Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, The fruit of the womb is a reward.*

If having any child is a privilege, a gift, a blessing of grace, a kindness, what must it be to carry the One who would save the very sinner who is carrying Him? Yes, she is highly favoured. When the angel announced the coming conception he said, *"Rejoice, highly favoured one"* What a privilege for her. She is a sinner, yet she will bear her own Saviour! But what is the privilege? *"the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!"* *29 But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. 30 Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. 31 "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. 32 "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. 33 "And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."*

The first privilege she had is for God to favour her with salvation. No one earns that right. No one merits it. She was favoured long before the angel came and long before she lived her morally blameless life. We can even say that it was that unmerited favour that worked in her life in such a way that she was kept from sin. Before the world was made she, a sinner, was favoured. She was chosen before the foundation of the world. God loved her from all eternity, but in exactly the same way that He loves each and every one of His elect people.

The second privilege is that He had kept her from sin, and specifically immorality. She had been kept by the power of God. God had been her refuge and strength.

The third privilege she had was that she was a human part in the history of redemption. Now let us stop there. Let us remember that Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba all had a similar privilege. Anyone who talks to another soul of the Saviour has the same privilege. They are bringing Christ into the world all over again.

Elizabeth recognized that her privilege was related to her believing: *45 “Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.”*

The fourth privilege she had was that it is God manifest in the flesh who is conceived in her womb. She is carrying the God-Man. No wonder she was highly favoured. Chosen for salvation. Chosen for service. Chosen for suffering because of that service. Have you ever viewed your service for God as a sign of high privilege and favour? Have you ever considered that telling others of the Saviour is a sign of God having highly favoured you, even where they reject you and hate you and deride you for bringing Christ to them?

Pain

The fourth word to describe this scene is **pain**.

I have already described the scene. Standing near enough to the Cross are the three Mary's. When Simeon saw the Lord as a baby he said to Mary, *Luke 2:34 “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”*

A sword will pierce your own soul. That is the pain she will experience. Mary has had to suffer misunderstanding as a pregnant unmarried woman. She has

undoubtedly suffered the loss of Joseph. Now she stands before the cruelty of the cross to watch her son die.

She is watching her own Son die. Think of how you would feel. Which parent could cope with it? Surely any parent would be so bewildered by grief that they would be wishing that they could take the place of their child.

I have listened to parents of criminals on death row who have simply said, "Whatever else he did he was my son." But this is not a criminal. We do not know whether the parents of the thieves were there, but surely they would be watching with regret.

Such a parent would probably been saying either, "I wish I had been a better parent." Or "I did my best, but it just wasn't good enough." Mary's grief is not like that. Her son had grown to be the kindest, most loving Person. He had never sworn, lied, stolen, lusted, dishonoured her, been careless, negligent as a son, thoughtless, or disobedient. This adds to her grief. He was perfectly loving to her.

Yet her grief is not only that natural grief of watching her own child be murdered in the cruellest form invented, there is a spiritual element to it. Her soul is pierced with the sense that the Son who had come to save the lost, and had done so much good was a sign being spoken against. He, who offered salvation was being rejected.

Mary is not grieved that she is being rejected, but that He is. In that sense she stands for every evangelist who has preached the crucified Saviour and yet has seen Him openly despised and rejected of men. Do not think that the grief we should feel is that *we* have been rejected, it is that *He* has been rejected.

Look at Him on the cross in the communion meal. Grieve that His people do not treat that meal with sufficient awe that they even come whenever it is celebrated. Look at Him on the cross when He is preached in the open air and grieve, not for the preacher being rejected and despised, but for Him. The sword pierces our own souls as He is ridiculed and rejected, thrown out and trodden down.

That is the reason I have chosen the word **pain**.

PROTECTION

The fifth word that describes this scene is **protection**. The Lord looked down from the cross, and among the crowd He saw four people. Others were jeering, the soldiers were gambling, or had settled back for the long wait while the crucified men agonised in death. But four people were standing near the cross. One of them is the disciple who with the others had run away to save his own neck. He had said

that though all would run, he would stay. But the Lord was right, “This night all of you will forsake me.” They did. He did. But, this man knew some of the people at the trial and had got in to the room, and had got Peter in as well. Now he is the only man from the Twelve standing at the foot of the cross. Judas is scurrying away to throw the money at the feet of the priests and from there to the Potter’s Field where he will hang himself in remorse and despair. He is sorry for the shame not the sin. He is not repentant towards God. Peter has gone into hiding with a broken heart. Like many of us who have let the Lord down he is chiding himself constantly. “Why, O why did I do it? Why didn’t I speak up? I would rather be dead than carry this memory with me.” And yet he doesn’t kill himself in despair. He waits and later he will plunge into the sea to get to the Lord first and to sort himself out in private with Jesus by the sea. But John is there along with three women with the same name. One had seven devils expelled from her. The other is a relative and then there is Mary, His mother.

He speaks to her and addresses her as “*Woman.*” What speculation has surrounded this opening word! They wonder why He did not say, “Mother!” Some suggest it is disrespectful, but how can the one who said, “Honour your father and your mother,” ever be thought to break His own commandment? He went to the feast with his parents and when they came back and found him in discussion with the leaders of the Jews she protested, but he answered that he had to be about His Father’s business. He then went with them and was under their care and authority. He grew in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and men through those teenage years.

Earlier at His first miracle she had appealed to Him to do something, but His reply then was, “*Woman...*” Please notice that there is not the slightest thought that she had power over Him as the Roman Catholics suggest. Instead, with respect He rebuffs her, yet He does provide the wine by His power. Here however, when all His love to her might well draw forth the affection that required him to address her as mother, we find Him again calling her “*Woman.*” Why is that?

In order to understand it we could also remember the recent moment with Peter. Peter is cursing and swearing with an oath that he is not a follower of Christ.

The Lord could have said something to Peter, after all, they were within hearing distance of each other, but we are told that Jesus looked at Peter. He protected Peter while at the same time reproofing him. We see the same here.

A hostile crowd are buying for His blood. They are deriding Him and cursing Him. What will they do if He looks down and identifies His mother? Surely, they would

have turned all their venom on her. And so He speaks, “Woman...” It is a term of respect, but it protects her from the hate and horror of the crowd.

It is wonderful that the Saviour does this. We will never know just how often He has protected us from His enemies, but for now we see the perfect son, honouring and protecting her in every way. He is laying down His life for her and covering her.

That is what is happening: **protection.**

Provision

The sixth word is **provision.** The Lord provides for the future of His mother. This is what tells us that Joseph has certainly died, and that he, as the firstborn, is responsible for her.

Please notice that He did not provide for her by leaving her an inheritance. When he wanted to illustrate the answer to a question about paying tax to Caesar he borrowed a coin. When they needed to pay Temple tax he sent Peter to fish for it! Later Peter and John in going to the Temple said, “Silver and gold have I none.” The Lord had nowhere to lay His head. He was never like the tele-evangelists of our day. They want poor and rich to give to them, but the message of the Saviour to the rich young ruler was:

Luke 18:22 So when Jesus heard these things, He said to him, “You still lack one thing. **Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor,** and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”

The Lord owned nothing. The money in the bag was for all. He did not have a house, or flocks or fields or cash to leave in His will.

All he can offer her for an inheritance is what he can offer us: *1 Peter 1:4 an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven...*

We might think he could have provided for her by a miracle, after all, he did the same for the widow of Zarephath.

1 Kings 17:8 Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 9 “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you.” 10 So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, indeed a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, “Please bring me a little water in a cup, that I may drink.” 11 And as she was going to get it, he called to her and said, “Please bring

me a morsel of bread in your hand.” 12 So she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I do not have bread, only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar; and see, I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” 13 And Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son. 14 “For thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the LORD sends rain on the earth.’” 15 So she went away and did according to the word of Elijah; and she and he and her household ate for many days. 16 The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke by Elijah.

Why not do this? Why not provide an unending supply of food, clothing that never wore out and shoes that never needed mending, manna that could be collected each day around her house,

Why not provide for her by making her self-sufficient and wealthy through a miracle like that of the widow of one of the prophets?

2 Kings 4:1 A certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, saying, “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the LORD. And the creditor is coming to take my two sons to be his slaves.” 2 So Elisha said to her, “What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?” And she said, “Your maidservant has nothing in the house but a jar of oil.” 3 Then he said, “Go, borrow vessels from everywhere, from all your neighbours – empty vessels; do not gather just a few. 4 “And when you have come in, you shall shut the door behind you and your sons; then pour it into all those vessels, and set aside the full ones.” 5 So she went from him and shut the door behind her and her sons, who brought the vessels to her; and she poured it out. 6 Now it came to pass, when the vessels were full, that she said to her son, “Bring me another vessel.” And he said to her, “There is not another vessel.” So the oil ceased. 7 Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, “Go, sell the oil and pay your debt; and you and your sons live on the rest.”

It is so that we might all see that His care of her is complete. In John’s home she will not be wealthy, but she will not be lonely. In John’s home she will not have wealthy and worldly friends, but poor and spiritually minded ones. Her greatest needs are not freedom from poverty, she needs food and clothing, yes, but she needs these in the context of the love, care and spiritual encouragement that only John could provide. The ordinary way the widow and orphan, the poor and needy

in the church are to be cared for is by other believers. Believing relatives have the primary responsibility, but after them comes the local church as a body, pooling resources to provide for the needy.

By His Spirit the Lord Jesus later moves Paul to write to Timothy so that all believers in every church in every age would take care of their own elderly relatives. *1 Timothy 5:3 Honour widows who are really widows.* This tells us that the church has a role to play in caring for destitute widows, however, he adds: *8 But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.* The Lord leads the way for us. Throughout the Bible the widow and orphan are given special mention for our concern. James writes *(1:27) Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.* God would give them justice. Fields are to be left for widows to glean from. They are to be specially invited to your feasts. They are not to be made bankrupt and left in debt and destitution. Rather their voice is to be heard. The tithe of every third year was to be distributed among the preachers, widows and orphans and strangers in need according to Old Testament laws. Widows are to be defended and not oppressed or taken advantage of. The Lord is watching our treatment of widows.

Yet for all this, in Christ's day the religious leaders devoured widows' houses and made long prayers for money. Into that environment of greed and oppression the Lord makes provision for His mother. He had nowhere to lay His head. He borrowed a coin, a donkey and a tomb. But, He knew John and through Him He provided a home for His mother.

Now this has a very practical application. When you come to decide what you are leaving behind and where it will go do not forget the local church. Yes, you may have to care for you own family, but they may have little need in this country to have tens of thousands of pounds added to their comfortable bank balance. You may foresee their need to get their children through university, and you may hand them some for that. However, souls are dying for lack of resources to send missionaries. Many New Tribes Missioners have to come home on furlough in order to remind churches that they exist, and to raise funds so that they can continue. In the New Tribes Mission training school there is a box of second hand stuff so that trainees and the lecturers can go and collect clothes and other items for themselves and their children. Widows and orphans in Sri Lanka, India, Nigeria are being oppressed because of poverty.

Christ has commissioned us to care for them. He is not providing an unending supply of meal and oil, but He is moving us to live loosely to our possessions here and to leave much to the mission and welfare work of the local churches when we finally lose our grip on it when we die. I plead with you to think of the future of the mission of the churches to win souls, translate scripture and give help to its poor and the world's needy when you write your will.

Yet, how much better, once you know you have sufficient to give it now.

Let us therefore see in Christ the great example of having lived without trusting in uncertain riches, and yet providing the very best future for His mother. He provided material comfort and spiritual communion in the home of the disciple John.

Why did He not provide through her other sons? First, they were not yet believers. Secondly, they were not there! He was guaranteeing her future.

Of course, He was providing another home for her as well. *"I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will also come again so that where I am you may be also."* Even John's home, in which she lived out her days, was not her permanent dwelling place. At the very point when we could expect the Lord to be selfishly focussed on Himself, He focussed on her and provided for her future comfort and security. He was dying for her, paying for her sins, suffering because she was a sinner, being punished by His Heavenly Father for His earthly mother's sins

The disciple whom Jesus loved obviously also loved Jesus Christ. He was willing to take this woman into his care just because Jesus asked it. What a lesson for us. Do you know someone else's mother or father in their old age and immense need who should be under your personal care? The pastors cannot do everything. Their situation may not allow it, but yours may. Let us not permit our old members to die alone. Oh, how I feared this for my father. He did not want to move, but I dreaded him being by himself at that moment when the Lord called him. How gracious of the Lord to provide through other family members. What of those among us? Who makes sure that they will not be found one day alone? Who ensures that their need of earthly comfort and human companionship is met?

The Lord provided for that need.

Pardon

The seventh word is **pardon**.

Years earlier as the angel promised the Saviour and the shepherds came to tell that unto them a Saviour had been born, we are told that *Luke 1:19-20 But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.*

Even before that Mary had responded to the meeting with Elizabeth in these words: *Luke 1:46-47 And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour. Mary knew that Jesus was a redeemer, yet it is not her that we are now focussed on, it is the disciple whom Jesus loved.*

This scene is one in which John knows he is forgiven. He had boasted such great things, but he slept through Gethsemane and fled from arrest. He watched the cruel trial silently and helplessly. Now he stands at the foot of the cross as a wretched and helpless failure. It is these words, where Jesus entrusts him with the care of His mother that tells John that Jesus has forgiven him.

David said, *Psalms 51:12-13 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners shall be converted to You.* If only we can be restored and forgiven, then we will serve again with joyful willingness.

John is being restored and pardoned. He doesn't make excuses. He doesn't say, "I have let you down. I can never be trusted again." He takes the responsibility of Mary for what it is: it is the Lord's way of saying, "You backslid. You ran. You saved your own skin. You were a coward. You sinned. You neglected prayer. I forgive you, and now I am giving you a job to do." John accepted that responsibility.

If you let the Lord down in some terrible way, you need to come back, like John, to the Cross. Come in your failure and sin. Come and look up to the crucified One. Eventually as He sees one or another in need He will say to you, "Go and care for that person in my name." As you accept that role, you will know and feel His smile on you.

Conclusion:

This scene speaks of God's promise fulfilled in Christ, born of a virgin, born under the law, to redeem you. It tells of purity, and how vital it is that we be clean channels of blessing as we play our part in carrying Christ to lost sinners. It tells of the high privilege of having any part in bringing Christ to a lost world. It speaks of the pain of believers as they see Christ rejected again. The same sword pierces

their souls as pierced Mary's. It shows us Christ protecting a vulnerable woman and illustrates His care and keeping of us from so much suffering in a sin loving, Saviour and saint hating world. There is provision as she is placed in the care of another believer just as every widow is to be ultimately cared for by the Lord's people, and indeed, Christ has provided the local church as a means of caring for all His needy people. Finally there is pardon. If you, like John, think that your days of service are over because you have let the Lord down, go to the foot of the Cross and wait there. You will find that as you repent and sorrow there for your sins and His suffering for your sins, He will commission you personally in some area of future service, and He will entrust to you the lifelong care of His people.

What wonderful lessons there are as we hear these words spoken to Mary and John from the lips of the suffering Saviour at the cross.

4.

MATTHEW 27:46 AND ABOUT THE NINTH HOUR JESUS CRIED OUT WITH A LOUD VOICE, SAYING, “ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?” THAT IS, “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”

Nothing is new about the injustice of the cross. Countless innocent victims have perished in Kangaroo Courts. False charges have led to unknown numbers of unnamed victims spending time in jail, paying unjust fines or even going to cruel punishments and even executions. There is nothing new about man’s inhumanity to man.

There is nothing new in the persecution of believers by unbelievers. Luke 11 records the words of Jesus before the cross to those intent on His murderous death:

47 “Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. 48 In fact, you bear witness that you approve the deeds of your fathers; for they indeed killed them, and you build their tombs. 49 Therefore the wisdom of God also said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and persecute,’ 50 that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation, 51 from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation.”

We know little of the words of those being murdered in this way. Often the murderer going to execution has his or her last words immortalised, but what can the victims say? Who is there to record their last words?

When it comes to believers being executed for the crime of trusting Jesus Christ and turning from personal sin we have many examples:

The last words of John Hus were that, “in 100 years, God will raise up a man whose calls for reform cannot be suppressed.” His words were fulfilled when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Thesis to the church door almost 100 years later.

Sir Anthony Kingston, whom the good Bishop John Hooper had been the means of converting from a sinful life, entreated him, with many tears, to spare himself as he was about to die for following Christ, and urged him to remember that *“Life was sweet – and death was bitter.”* To this the noble martyr returned this

memorable reply, that “*Eternal life was more sweet – and eternal death was more bitter.*” From this conversation he went to his death.

Rowland Taylor, minister at Hadleigh, was sent down from London to Hadleigh, to his great delight, to be burned before the eyes of his parishioners. When he got within two miles of Hadleigh, the Sheriff of Suffolk asked him how he felt. “God be praised, Master Sheriff,” was his reply, “never better! For now I am *almost at home*. I lack but just two stiles to go over, and I am even at my Father’s house!”

John Bradford turned to the young man, Leaf, who suffered with him, and said, “Be of good comfort, brother; for we shall have a merry supper with the Lord this night!”

Latimer’s last words were like the blast of a trumpet, which rings even to this day, “Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day, by God’s grace, light such a candle in England as I trust shall never be put out!”

Cranmer steadily holding out his *right hand* in the fire said, with reference to his previously having signed a recantation, “*This unworthy right hand,*” while steadily holding up his left hand towards heaven.

Some men and women have cringed and cursed as they faced death. One of the dying men went to the grave cursing and the other went to his grave praying, but the Lord Jesus, shouts with a loud voice, “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*”

For six hours the Lamb of God has been hanging on the cross. Three of those hours were spent in the natural light of day from 9 am to midday. At midday, suddenly there was an unnatural darkness. It lasted for three hours.

The hymnwriter Isaac Watts wrote:

Alas! and did my Saviour bleed
And did my Sovereign die?
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I?

That body, our Lord Jesus, slain—
And bathed in its own blood—
While the firm mark of wrath divine,
His Soul in anguish stood.

Was it for crimes that I had done
He groaned upon the tree?

Amazing pity! grace unknown!
And love beyond degree!

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

His first word from the cross is "*Forgive them.*" They are forgiven, but He is forsaken.

Throughout the Old Testament we see men who felt utterly dejected and who feared being finally forsaken by their God. What despair there is in this experience. To be utterly alone. To be without the slightest help. To have no one for you, and the one from whom you need, expect and want help has left you alone and unaided.

Time and again the people of God pray that the Lord will not forsake them. It is their greatest fear. Time and again the Lord says to them that He promises not to forsake them completely.

Here is the prayer: *Psalm 27:9 Do not hide Your face from me; Do not turn Your servant away in anger; You have been my help; Do not leave me nor forsake me, O God of my salvation.*

The believer fears being forsaken in the weakness, loneliness, anxieties and confusion of old age: *Psalm 71:9 Do not cast me off in the time of old age; Do not forsake me when my strength fails.*

The enemies of God's people long to see it happen: They say *Psalm 71:11 "God has forsaken him; Pursue and take him, for there is none to deliver him."*

Believers, looking at all the struggles of life, and knowing how weak they are fear falling away from Christ, but encourage themselves with these prayerful words: *Psalm 138:8 The LORD will perfect that which concerns me; Your mercy, O LORD, endures forever; Do not forsake the works of Your hands.*

God promises to keep them, saying *Isaiah 42:16 I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, And crooked places straight. These things I will do for them, And not forsake them.*

Yet still the people fear: *Isaiah 49:14 But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, And my Lord has forgotten me."*

Yes, being forsaken, or even the threat of it is a terrible thing. What the Lord Jesus Christ has passed through for three dark hours is the most awful human experience ever. Man forsaken by God. How this term God forsaken has come into our language. There is a place of utter desolation and it is called a God-forsaken place. But here is a God-forsaken Person.

So, as we consider the Lord's words here there are lessons of immense value to learn.

Let us be sure we understand when these words were spoken. The darkness came on the earth at the sixth hour. For three hours Christ suffered in silence. It was when the substitutionary sacrifice was complete. Only then did He utter the words. When they were written a thousand years earlier they were looking forward. When they were uttered they were reflecting. It was *Mark 15:34 at the ninth hour (that) Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"* It was as those sufferings ended that He gave voice to the experience He was passing through.

The voice speaks as the darkness lifts.

We are firstly going to look into the deep darkness, and then we are going to listen to the loud cry.

What we see in the deep darkness

FIRST, WE SEE THE DARKNESS OF HUMAN SIN
How bad can things get? How evil is Man really?

It is Man that has done this deed. This is the greatest sin of all. The creature murders the creator. God has loved the world so greatly that He gave His only begotten Son. Christ was in the world and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Man rejects God, despises God and sets out to rid the world of God. To do it they kill God.

Friends, if Man would seek to exterminate God what other crime would he not be willing to commit.

HE IS FORSAKEN BY HIS FRIENDS. The Lord is the One who promised never to forsake His people, but we now see Him forsaken. His disciples had promised never to leave Him nor forsake Him, and yet at the first sign of serious trouble we read: *Matthew 26:56 "But all this was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be*

fulfilled.” Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled. They ran for their lives and left Him utterly alone.

This was all in fulfilment of all that the Lord had said years before: Zechariah 13:7 “Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, Against the Man who is My Companion,” Says the LORD of hosts. “Strike the Shepherd, And the sheep will be scattered; Then I will turn My hand against the little ones.”

See the depths of those who say they follow Him. They are fair-weather friends.

BUT WE ALSO SEE THE EVIL OF MAN. They have chosen to have a rebel and robber walking their streets rather than a righteous man, a murderer rather than the Messiah and a sinner rather than a saviour. What a terrible thing has happened to Man. In choosing sin He prefers to kill God rather than crown Him.

This statement of Christ comes at the end of that terrible period of darkness. Luke 1 tells us:

76 “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, 77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, 78 Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; 79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The world of sin and ignorance of God is a dark place. Isaiah is quoted in Matthew 4:16 *The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned.*” How glorious that Christ came to bring light. He is the Light of the World, but men loved darkness rather than light. Why? Because, says John, their deeds were evil. Men do not want the light shining in their lives for the same reason that a criminal doesn’t want to find a policeman or the teenage boy doesn’t want his mother to look into his untidy room.

And so it was that darkness covered the whole land while Christ suffered, and at about the ninth hour as the darkness lifted He cried out, *“My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”* That cry helps us to see the darkness of this action of Man. *All have sinned. There is none righteous, no not one. They have all gone astray.*

Man boasts of his enlightenment. To promote abortion and stifle the voice of those who consider it murder of the unborn, to promote homosexuality as if it is equal in value and morality to sexual purity or biblically defined marriage, to silence the message of Genesis as a myth when it is fundamental to Man’s temporal and

eternal good – these are the boast of the enlightened. The cry is, “This is the 21st Century!” They participate in Gay Pride marches and wear their tee shirts saying, “Some people are gay. Get over it.” But these things are not new. The Romans viewed having homosexual relations with young men as quite normal, infanticide was widely practiced and recreational sex was commonplace. The fact is that rarely in the history of the world have there been times when these things were not tolerated and widely accepted or overlooked within society. Remember the Benjamites in the days of the judges, Sodom and numerous other cities boasting their liberal views on moral matters.

We are to be tolerant of anything and everything except the most terrible excesses, paedophilia, sex trafficking and the like, and of course, we are intolerant of pro-lifers and those who believe that marriage is only defined as the union of one man to one woman for life.

Atheistic Man has even created his own ten commandments:¹

1. Be open-minded and be willing to alter your beliefs with new evidence.
2. Strive to understand what is most likely to be true, not to believe what you wish to be true.
3. The scientific method is the most reliable way of understanding the natural world.
4. Every person has the right to the control of their body.
5. God is not necessary to be a good person or to live a full and meaningful life.
6. Be mindful of the consequences of all your actions and recognize that you must take responsibility for them.
7. Treat others as you would want them to treat you, and can reasonably expect them to want to be treated. Think about their perspective.
8. We have the responsibility to consider others, including future generations.
9. There is no one right way to live.
10. Leave the world a better place than you found it.

Imagine a world like this. You don't have to. This is our world.

Proverbs 21:2 Every way of a man is right in his own eyes. Proverbs 12:15 The way of a fool is right in his own eyes. Says the wise Solomon. He sees that people make their own rules for life to suit themselves. If they are criticised for their choices they excuse themselves. If someone doesn't live to their opinion of what's right and wrong, they accuse and condemn them.

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/johnbeckett/2015/01/atheists-ten-commandments.html>

The Scriptures lay it on thick how bad a situation this is:

Proverbs 16:2 All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, But the LORD weighs the spirits.

Proverbs 16:25 There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death.

Proverbs 20:6 Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, But who can find a faithful man?

Proverbs 30:12 There is a generation that is pure in its own eyes, Yet is not washed from its filthiness.

Man has such a high opinion of Himself and His goodness as they judge their lives by their own standards, and compare themselves with each other and give themselves such a high score in virtue and goodness. But it is a dark world of sin and ignorance that we live in.

How different to David, Asa and Jehosaphat along with others in the Old Testament of whom it is said they, *“did what was good and right in the eyes of the LORD.”*

But when men and women choose to invent their own ethics and morality, what are they really saying? They are joining in with the crowd at the trial of Jesus and saying: *“We will not have this man to rule over us.”*

It is the expression of Psalm 2:

1 Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, 3 “Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us.”

Isaiah said, *“We have turned every one to his own way.” (53:6)*

This is man’s boast. Still one of the most popular songs played at funerals, now overtaken by the Christ insulting Life of Brian, is “I did it my way.” There is no doubt that this is the darkness of Man. He has forsaken the Law of the Lord. He despises the Word of God. He rejects the interference of God. Yet, at the end he expects to be accepted with everyone else in Heaven exactly because he did it his way.

Man’s way leads us to Calvary. The politicians deciding what we should believe and do. Those in power looking for a quiet life. The main part of humanity like a mob. Live and let live is their cry. All they want is a peaceful life. But it leads to

Calvary. It leads to these three dark hours when Man's sin is seen for the evil that it is as the only just Man on earth is butchered.

Wicked Man crucifies the sinless Messiah. Sinners murder the Saviour. Yet, at the end of the darkness we do not hear a complaint about Man. He doesn't cry "My enemies, My enemies, why have you rejected me?" We would understand it if He did. The Lord cried to His people in the days of Jeremiah 2:5 *Thus says the LORD: "What injustice have your fathers found in Me, That they have gone far from Me, Have followed idols, And have become idolaters?* Pilate cried out to the crowd, Mark 15:14 *"Why, what evil has He done?" But they cried out all the more, "Crucify Him!"* We might ask hypocritical Pilate why he washed his hands and thought this would clear him of guilt.

This is one of the things the darkness speaks of. Righteous men forsake the sinless Messiah. Sinners murder the Saviour. Yet, at the end of the darkness we do not hear a complaint about Man. He doesn't cry "My friends, My friends, why have you forsaken me?" The disciples declared much and delivered little. They promised everything and performed nothing. Yet, at the Cross Christ doesn't complain or cry against them.

The Saviour is quoting the Psalm of David written 1000 years previously. He does so in order that we would see the scene before us in all its darkness was prophesied way back then.

Psalm 22:6 But I am a worm, and no man; A reproach of men, and despised by the people. 7 All those who see Me ridicule Me; They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, 8 "He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him; Let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!" 11 Be not far from Me, For trouble is near; For there is none to help. 12 Many bulls have surrounded Me; Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled Me. 13 They gape at Me with their mouths, Like a raging and roaring lion. 16 For dogs have surrounded Me; The congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet; 17 I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me. 18 They divide My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots.

If you didn't know any better you would think this Psalm was written after the event. But the Lord cries with a loud voice, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" And our eyes see into the darkness of Man's sin. They are crucifying the only good man Ecclesiastes 7:20 said *For there is not a just man on earth who does good And does not sin.* That was true until the Saviour was born. Now there is a just Man on earth who does good and does not sin. Man kills Him. Man chooses

Barabbas. Man chooses to have thieves and murderers, liars and cheats, rather than a just Man who does good and does not sin.

Christ cries out and we see the darkness of Man's evil heart.

SECONDLY, WE SEE THE DEPTHS OF THE DARKNESS OF MAN'S ETERNAL SUFFERING FOR SIN.

Judas left the disciples and the words that describe his exit are powerful and symbolic: *John 13:30 Having received the piece of bread, he then went out immediately. And it was night. And it was night*—Judas walked away from the Light of the World.

THERE IS A TEMPORAL CONSEQUENCE OF WALKING AWAY FROM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

John 8:12 Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." Judas had been following Christ outwardly. He had journeyed up and down Judea. He had crossed the Lake of Galilee and had fooled everyone. When the Lord said early on in His ministry, *John 6:70 "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?"* No one said, "It's Judas." Later just before Judas left we are told: *John 13:21 When Jesus had said these things, He was troubled in spirit, and testified and said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me." 22 Then the disciples looked at one another, perplexed about whom He spoke. "They were perplexed about whom He spoke"*— They had no idea. Judas had fooled them all. He was following Jesus physically. He seemed to be walking in the light. However, men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. Judas loved darkness rather than light.

However, as Judas went out *it was night*. He walked into the darkness.

There is an eternal consequence of walking away from the Light of the World.

The door closed behind Judas. He had walked out into the darkness. But within a short while, in the darkness of remorseful despair he hung himself and the door of death opened. He walked through it and it closed behind Him. We can say *And it was night*.

The Lord Himself, who spoke so much of heaven, also spoke without any apology, but with great imagery of the final destiny of the unsaved saying,

Matthew 8:12 "But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Matthew 22:13 "Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take

him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew 25:30 'And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

And it was night— Judas went out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Now, we must be careful here. This is not simply the future tense: there will be. The first word translated from the Greek means this: 'In that place will be'.

Judas went to a place of outer darkness. In that place there is only the weeping of hopeless remorse and the gnashing of teeth in resentful anger that Christ is Lord, and they are utterly defeated.

The apostles described the when they said that *Acts 1:25 "Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place."*

Yes, the darkness speaks of the final darkness of unforgiven Man's final unending destiny—outer darkness.

THIRDLY, WE SEE THE DEPTHS OF THE DARKNESS OF CHRIST'S
SUBSTITUTIONARY SUFFERING FOR SIN

He cried out, *My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?* The eternal Son of God said, *John 1:18 No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.* He had never been anywhere outside the affection of the Father. Yet He is forsaken by the Father. Adam was thrust out of the Garden of Eden and Christ is thrust out of the Father's presence.

David said *Psalms 37:25 I have been young, and now am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken.* But we have seen the righteous forsaken. The dark hours of the cross were three hours when He plunged into outer darkness and knew the wrath of God against sin. He who knew no sin was made sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Oh how the Roman Catholics depict a sorrowful suffering Saviour on their crucifixes, but God blotted out the real work of the Cross. When Man had done his worst, God shut out the noonday sun and poured out His justice upon sin in His Son.

You see, we cannot understand what Christ suffered by our senses. Our eyes cannot grasp in the contortions of His body what is happening in His soul. Our ears could not discern what anguish He is experience as He groaned under the weight of the infinite wrath of an angry God. God blotted it out in complete darkness so that the only way we could comprehend it is by the words of explanation that Holy

Scripture give us as they describe Him. *Isaiah 53:10 Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin.* The God to whom Jesus appeals in this prayer, “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*” is the One who bruised Him, put Him to grief and made His soul an offering for sin.

Jesus Christ is plunged into the darkness of eternal punishment. His sufferings are infinite. His sufferings are sacrificial and substitutionary.

This darkness speaks of His suffering for sin

What we hear in the loud cry

Three hours of quietness end with a shocking loud cry. All the pent up emotion of the unequalled agony of His suffering suddenly breaks the silence. *My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*

HE IS EXPRESSING HIS FEELINGS

Some people know the desolation they experienced when someone they loved walks out on their marriage—they are desolate in their sense of being forsaken. A child is abandoned by its parents— it is unwanted. A wounded soldier is left to die or be captured by his comrades—as he lies there he has an overwhelming sense of being forsaken. The girls captured by Boko Haram are left to their fate—they are forsaken. The parents look to the government, and the government doesn’t consider it important enough to throw all their resources into the recovery of those girls—they feel forsaken. Oh the hopelessness of the experience. It is agony.

For three hours this has been the experience of the Saviour, but its depths are deeper than we can ever understand. Here is the beloved, the obedient lover of God. Here is the One who called God His Father. *The Father loves the Son.* He had said.

Previously He has felt hunger and thirst, tiredness and pain. He has expressed emotion such as grief and anger. Here He is expressing what has been His experience for those three hours from midday to three in the afternoon. He has felt and experienced the depths of being forsaken by the One He loves with all His heart, soul, mind and strength.

When someone we do not know walks away from us we feel nothing. When someone we dislike leaves us we may well feel relief. When someone we love leaves us we experience so many distressing emotions. My mother and father died. I came to their home and they were not there I felt their absence keenly. I went

through their keepsakes and treasured possessions. I felt the grief rise in my heart. I felt their absence, but I did not feel abandoned.

A parent gives up on the difficulties of child-rearing an 11 year old. They turn up at the offices of the council and refuse every piece of advice and offer of help. The child listens in horror as she realises that her mother intends to leave her there with strangers. Nothing that is said changes the mother's mind. Eventually the mother rises and the young 11 year old watches as her own mother walks to the door and without looking back leaves her with that social worker.

The child is young enough not to experience some things and old enough to know the despair, shock and horror that the one she loved and trusted has left her to her fate. She does not feel her mother's absence, she feels utterly abandoned. She has been forsaken.

The vast crowds of thousands of fair-weather followers forsook Christ when they realised the demands of the Christian life. His only question is addressed to His Twelve disciples, "Will you also go away?" They could see nowhere to go. If they wanted eternal life they must follow the Saviour. Yet, even the eleven remaining disciples ran away when they were faced with the armed mob in Gethsemane. He expected it, yet that must have been a grief to Him.

But here, on Calvary's Cross, His own Heavenly Father has forsaken Him. The sense of fatherly affection that flowed down to Him constantly is gone. He is left to walk into the darkness alone, to bear the punishment for sin alone. No one is holding his hand, no one is speaking encouragement into the darkness. Earth is silent. Heaven is silent.

Lamentations 1 is His cry:

12 "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Behold and see If there is any sorrow like my sorrow, Which has been brought on me, Which the LORD has inflicted In the day of His fierce anger. 13 From above He has sent fire into my bones, And it overpowered them; He has spread a net for my feet And turned me back; He has made me desolate And faint all the day. 14 The yoke of my transgressions was bound; They were woven together by His hands, And thrust upon my neck. He made my strength fail; The Lord delivered me into the hands of those whom I am not able to withstand."

He does not say, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me," for effect. He feels it. He feels the utter desolation that the sinner will feel and experience eternally.

HE IS EXPRESSING HIS FAITH

This is from Psalm 22. How that Psalm is a prayer. When He cannot say, “My Father,” He still says, “My God.” He expresses His feelings in the words of Scripture. He prays out those words which lead us through the description of Calvary’s crucifixion scene in such minute detail. But that Psalm leads from this cry of forsakenness to the cry of faith in verse 21:

Psalms 22:21 You have answered Me.

Throughout those hours of substitutionary suffering, the Lord Jesus Christ continued to trust. He was made sin, He was not made to sin. He carried sin, but He did not commit sin. His sorrow was unlike any other sorrow because His love for the Father was unlike any other’s love for their father.

Now, as He utters the words, the answer comes. The sacrifice is accepted. His soul was made an offering for. And we reach that point where faith is expressed in these words from the cross.

Psalms 22:21 You have answered Me.

“I am trusting. I have been praying. You have now answered.” God’s smile is restored. God lifts up the light of His countenance upon Him. The storm is over. The storm clouds clear. The light of day returns. It is three o’clock in the afternoon.

For centuries sinners had come to the Tabernacle or Temple with a spotless sacrifice. Once each year one lamb would be slaughtered and its blood collected to be taken through a great curtain which spoke of the separation between the worshipper and the worshipped, the sinner and the Sovereign Lord. Within moments that curtain will be torn open from the top to the bottom. It is too high for man to tear it. It is too thick for a man to tear it. He has been forsaken that we might not be. He has trusted God through the dark hours when He has been left to drink the cup of sorrow alone.

As Christ comes out of the darkness, the world is bathed in light again. The crowd look on Him whom they have pierced. Luke 23:48 tells us that within moments, as they look at His broken body, they begin to realise that they are watching something that is terribly wrong. *And the whole crowd who came together to that sight, seeing what had been done, beat their breasts and returned.*

As you listen to this cry remember that your sins cause it. God’s anger and justice cause it. God’s love for you cause it.

He is forsaken, but now He speaks to you, *“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”* *Matthew 28:18*”All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.

You can trust Him in life. Whatever trial, trouble or temptation you face. He will not abandon you to face it alone.

You can trust Him in death. Stephen faced death as the first martyr. Where was Christ? Standing in heaven. Showing Himself clearly to the eye of faith.

You can trust Him forever. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

Romans 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written: *“For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”* 37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

5.

JOHN 19:28 AFTER THIS, JESUS, KNOWING THAT ALL THINGS WERE NOW ACCOMPLISHED, THAT THE SCRIPTURE MIGHT BE FULFILLED, SAID, "I THIRST!"

Everything Christ said on the cross is full of practical importance for us.

There are three things said to others. They are words showing His relationship with others. They are words of sympathy:

Words of sympathy

The word of pardon to enemies

"Father forgive them," is prayer for His enemies. He doesn't want them cursed, but blessed. He doesn't desire them to be destroyed, but delivered. He doesn't desire their punishment but their pardon.

The word of promise to the repentant sinner

"Today, you shall be with me in Paradise," is a promise to a repentant and dying criminal. Here is a man deserving hell, but desiring heaven. The Lord assures him that he will be remembered.

The word of provision to the grieving mother

"Woman, behold your son," protects His mother as He provides for her comfort and future in the home of John.

Next comes the central word of the cross.

Words of suffering.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These words stand alone. They explain why He is there. They express what happened in the darkness. He was the most God-forsaken Person in the history of the world. Yet we not only see the darkness of Man's sin, the darkness of God's wrath, but also the darkness of Christ's experience. We hear something too. We hear a cry that expresses the strength of His feeling, and a cry that expresses the strength of His faith. He cries out in pain, yes, but He also cries out in prayer. The Psalm He uses has a moment when the sentence appears: "You have answered me." These words of suffering are recorded in Psalm 22 1000 years before the Saviour uttered them from His soul at the cross as He experienced them in their fullness.

Words of success

From the words of sympathy to the words of suffering, we now come to the words of success. There are three.

"I thirst." These are truly words of suffering, but they appear when His atoning sufferings are ended. We shall see why they are words of success soon. These derive from the words of *Psalm 69:21 ... for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.*

"It is finished." He is not declaring that His life has finished, but that His mission has finished. It is not "I am finished," but "it is finished."

Finally, *Luke 23:46, 'And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, "Father, 'into Your hands I commit My spirit.'" Having said this, He breathed His last.'*

I thirst John 19:28

Christ left the upper room. He said that He would not drink of the fruit of the vine until He drank it new in the kingdom. (Matthew 26:29) From there He went to Gethsemane and fell on His face *Mark 14:36 And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will."* From there He is arrested, tried, slapped, punched, whipped and crucified. He takes no refreshment and has no rest. At 9 o'clock in the morning after a sleepless night, He is impaled on the cross. The day warms up and the crowd spend the morning jeering. Someone offers vinegar mixed with a drug of some sort. He tastes but doesn't drink it. He must retain His full consciousness. He cannot allow Himself to be drugged. He has already asked His Father to forgive, but there are two other transactions He must be ready for in the first three hours. What are they?

Just as He had to go through Samaria because He had an appointment with the Samaritan woman, so the prophecy had said that He would die with thieves. He retains His mind un-drugged so that He can speak with that dying thief. He also has to care for His mother, and must speak clearly and coherently to her and John. He must also plunge into the darkness with His whole heart and mind loving God with heart, soul, mind and strength. He cannot allow anything to interfere with His mind. Lastly, He must not receive anything that alleviates His suffering. He knows that His soul is to be made an offering for sin. *Lamentations 1:12 "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Behold and see If there is any sorrow like my sorrow, Which has been brought on me, Which the LORD has inflicted In the day of His fierce anger.* His sorrow and suffering will be infinite. We cannot imagine them. We cannot describe them except by saying what they are not: they are not finite,

but infinite; not measurable, but immeasurable; not bearable, but unbearable; we cannot describe them, they are indescribable.

At midday there is a sudden, unnatural, and supernatural darkness for three hours. At the end of that time He cries with a loud voice. He breaks the pattern of His life and for just once, does not address God in prayer as His Father. He shouts in anguish, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” *Matthew 27:47 Some of those who stood there, when they heard that, said, “This Man is calling for Elijah!” 48 Immediately one of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink. 49 The rest said, “Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to save Him.”* Even after the kindness of the first three hours when he forgave, saved and cared, the crowd are still deriding Him.

Within moments He will have died. But there are three more sentences to say.

They are words expressing the success of this suffering. The sinless Saviour is sinless to the last. The suffering Saviour is suffering to the last. The sovereign Saviour is sovereign to the last. He is in control. He has command over His life and death. He sustains the Universe through the dark hours *by the word of His power*. But let us never forget. He is truly God, and He is truly Man. He is the last Adam. He is flesh and blood.

Let us then learn from His cry, “I thirst.”

They express the extent of His physical suffering. Think of Who this is who is suffering. He was the Word before He became the Word made flesh. He created all things. Yet, He who created water is thirsty. He gives rain in its due season. Clouds could have poured it down. Angels could have flown down with water. A poor thirsty soul stood by a well and was offered water by this Man. If she drank it, it would become living water within her, springing up to eternal life. Also *John 7:37 On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. 38 He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” 39 But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*

Here is the one who created the oceans, turned water into wine, pours out floods on dry ground, and offers living water. How can anyone who is thirsty come to the One who said, “I thirst”?

The answer is that we are viewing Him in His physical suffering. He has gone from the Last Supper to this moment without a drink. He has sweat great drops of blood. He has been lashed and bruised. His feet and hands are bleeding. The wounds from the crown of thorns are bleeding. He has lost blood, but no water has passed His lips.

He is thirsty physically. But that is not all, and that is not the main thing.

These words also express the extent of His spiritual suffering. He said, "I thirst."

Why then did He cry, "I thirst"? What spiritual suffering led to the cry?

The first reason is in the clue the scriptures give as John explains why He said, "I thirst."

It was because of something He knew. Throughout His life and ministry He knew what was happening. Nothing took Him by surprise. He knew that the hour had not yet come. In the Upper Room we are told that, Jesus, knowing the hour had come washed the disciples' feet. It is the hour of redemption. But the hour had not merely come it had passed.

He said this, *knowing that all things were now accomplished*. The great moment of the atoning and sacrificial sufferings when He bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors at the cross, had been accomplished. In a few brief moments He would dismiss His spirit, but first He says something that display the immensity of His spiritual suffering.

He had said, *For this purpose I came into the world*. He was fully conscious, even after the three dark hours, and was fully conscious of exactly what was happening and what had happened. He had not lost His mind and become confused. He knew that He had accomplished our salvation.

Why then is He thirsty in the innermost parts of His being? What has caused the great drought to enter His soul?

He thirsted because of the cup that He had been given to drink.

Don't you know that some things you drink will not stop you being thirsty? Sailors are adrift in the ocean and they have no water. Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink. What will happen if they drink salt water? They will become tormented by an even greater thirst.

Remember what He said, *Matthew 20:22 But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink. How confident the disciples were when they said, "We are able." But they dropped the cup and fled.*

Later it is written that He entered the Garden *Mark 14:36 And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will."*

Peter sought to stand for a moment with sword in hand, but *John 18:11 Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?"*

What is the cup He has drunk to the very dregs? It is the cup the lost sinner must drink.

The Old Testament prepares us for it by affirming that *Psalms 11:6 Upon the wicked He will rain coals; Fire and brimstone and a burning wind Shall be the portion of their cup.* After telling us that God is the judge, the psalmist writes: *Psalms 75:8 For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup, And the wine is red; It is fully mixed, and He pours it out; Surely its dregs shall all the wicked of the earth Drain and drink down.*

What is in the cup of the godly? *Psalms 16:5 O LORD, You are the portion of my inheritance and my cup; You maintain my lot.*

The Lord is their shepherd and therefore *Psalm 23:5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever.*

Fire, brimstone and a burning wind in the cup the ungodly deserve and the one they drink. So it is for the Saviour. Hear again of the future sorrow and suffering of the unsaved sinner. Revelation 14:10 tells us of the future punishment awaiting those who walk with Satan through life and find themselves following Him into Hell. It says that each and every person shall personally join Satan in His eternal sufferings: *"he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb."* That lost sinner is drinking wine. The wine is God's wrath. The cup is His indignation. The wine is 100% proof wrath, with not one drop of diluting mercy.

Yet Christ has drunk each of the cups that would have been handed to every one of His people. This tormenting drink is drunk full measure in fire and brimstone in the presence of the Holy Angels that never joined Satan in rebellion, and in the presence of the Lamb. These who chose Judas rather than Christ are the descendants of Adam, who chose sin before His sovereign, and the forefathers of those who choose the AntiChrist over Christ.

Let us catch a glimpse of the sorrowful destiny of the lost. Outside the home of a selfish wealthy man lay a beggar. He was covered in wounds and didn't even drive away the dogs that came and licked his wounds. No wonder we are told that Lazarus died. The rich man never gave a thought to Lazarus, even to give him crumbs from the table. But all that wealthy man's money spent on clothing himself, feeding himself, resting himself and using doctor's skills to heal himself could not prevent the inevitable. He too died. The rich man could afford a burial, and I am sure it was splendid. The best preachers, the finest ceremony, and afterwards, plenty to drink. I can imagine the people were told that the rich man was a good man, that he had only gone out of sight over the horizon of life, and would surely have a fine mansion in heaven.

However, once we look beyond death we can see Lazarus, a sinner saved by grace, resting in glory. But we see a very different picture. The beggar is rich. The rich man has become a beggar. How pathetic he seems to us as he begs for a mercy. What is that mercy? He begs that Lazarus be sent with one drop of water. *Luke 16:24 "Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'*

As the three hours of darkness end we appreciate that the very soul of Christ has been in that self-same flame. He has drunk the cup of God's indignation full of undiluted wrath. He has endured the unquenchable fire of Hell. No wonder He cried out, "I thirst."

Yet there is a third aspect of this amazing cry.

It expresses the extent of His spiritual longing. He was thirsting for the restoration of God's smile. *Psalms 42:1 As the deer pants for the water brooks, So pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? Psalms 63:1 O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water.*

He thirsts for the felt and experienced restoration of the smile of God. Oh, do not think God hated Him for those hours. We can certainly say that God the Father was never more pleased with the Son than in those hours of suffering when His Beloved One was accomplishing all that the Divine Trinity had agreed in the counsels of eternity.

Yes, God had been pleased with the Son. We know that He was well pleased with Jesus throughout His life, but He was also pleased to bruise Him. Listen to *Isaiah 53:10: Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief.* He had done no wrong, yet it pleased the Lord to do this.

As an essential part of this is that Christ passes through in full the whole human experience of abandonment and displeasure, of forsakenness. And this brings with it that thirst in His holy soul to be restored into the full realisation and experience of His Sonship. It is as if He longs to be able to look up and see the smile of His Heavenly Father again, instead of an angry God.

Think of it—unholy men are not thirsting for God. They hurry to forget God. They worship and serve the creature more than the Creator who is forever blessed. They have a thirst in their souls and anything except God will do for them. For some it is alcohol, for others, money. For some it is relationships, clothes, holidays, work, family, children and even more so in old age, the grandchildren idolised over and becoming their very reason for existence.

But as Christ comes to the end of the sufferings of His soul He still thirsts for God. The world will have anything except God to take away the thirst in their dry souls. Christ will have nothing but God to take away the thirst of His soul. He doesn't come back from Hell cursing His Father for the unrelenting wrath. He longs to enter into the fullest, closest, warmest, most loving fellowship again. He longs that this thirsting disappear and that He drinks deeply of the Father's love in His soul again. *As the deer pants for the waters, so Longs (His) soul for You, (His) God.*

It is as if in those long hours on the cross he has been like the Shulamite: *Song of Solomon 3:1 By night on my bed (the uncomfortable bed of crucifixion) I sought the one I love; I sought him, but I did not find him. 2 "I will rise now," I said, "And go about the city; In the streets and in the squares I will seek the one I love." I sought him, but I did not find him.* In the hours of darkness at Calvary He has looked for the Father's love and fellowship, but He has hunted in vain. There is only His displeasure. But now He is passionately desiring God, His Father to smile

again: *Psalms 84:2 My soul longs, yes, even faints For the courts of the LORD; My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.*

Application:

What glorious applications come to us from these two words, which are only one word in Greek.

Let us worship Him for enduring this insatiable thirst of body and soul.

Oh, blessed be the Lord Jesus. For my sake and because of my sin He had to endure the sufferings that made David prophesy of them in these words: *Psalms 22:15 My strength is dried up like a (piece of broken pottery), And My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death.* Thank you Lord. It was for me:

Death and the curse were in our cup:

It's filled for You, my Lord;

And You have drained the last dark drop,

It's empty now, my God.

That bitter cup, love drank it up;

Blessings are now outpoured.

Let us remember that He thirsted that we might never thirst:

God calls to us: *Isaiah 55:1 "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price.*

Isaiah 44:3 For I will pour water on him who is thirsty, And floods on the dry ground; I will pour My Spirit on your descendants, And My blessing on your offspring;

Let us, in this Christlike way, make our innermost longings for God our passionate prayers.

Isaiah 41:17 "The poor and needy seek water, but there is none, Their tongues fail for thirst. I, the LORD, will hear them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.

Let us look forward to heaven where we shall forever be with the One who said, "I thirst."

Isaiah 49:10 They shall neither hunger nor thirst, Neither heat nor sun shall strike them; For He who has mercy on them will lead them, Even by the springs of water He will guide them.

John 4:14 “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.”

John 7:37 Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink.

What a difference throughout eternity there will be between those who have chosen the world and its pleasures to slake their thirst rather than taken their dry and barren souls to Christ:

Isaiah says in chapter 65:13 Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, My servants shall eat, But you shall be hungry; Behold, My servants shall drink, But you shall be thirsty; Behold, My servants shall rejoice, But you shall be ashamed.

Our every spiritual longing will be satisfied throughout the eternal ages. Of the Lord’s people, saved by Christ, by grace, by His substitutionary sufferings in His soul it is said, *Revelation 7:16 “They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat.*

We shall never thirst again. God will be our God. We shall drink of the fountain of life, we shall be satisfied when we awake with His likeness. We shall never thirst again, and all because on that Cross, as He bore our curse, our punishment and our hell, our Saviour said, Διψῶ (pronounced *dipso*), I thirst.

Go to Him with your thirsty souls and drink of Christ each morning and evening, each Lord’s Day, in your family prayers, in your trials and temptations, in your failures, and in your successes. Oh how empty even our joys are to us when we turn from them unsatisfied and come back to the fountain for sin and uncleanness, even the Lord Jesus Christ where we both wash and drink, and are refreshed as our cup runs over.

6.

JOHN 19:30 SO WHEN JESUS HAD RECEIVED THE SOUR WINE, HE SAID, "IT IS FINISHED!" AND BOWING HIS HEAD, HE GAVE UP HIS SPIRIT.

John alone records these words. He has told us why He wrote any words in His gospel. He could have written more. He was selective. The words he has chosen serve the purpose of the whole gospel.

John 20: 30 And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

John recorded the words, "*It is finished!*" that you might have life by believing that the person who said them, Jesus, is the promised Saviour, the Son of God.

Knowing that all things were accomplished He had just said, "I thirst!" and immediately as the soldier ran to fetch a drink for Him and He received it, He says these words.

Throughout His sufferings He has remained fully conscious of all that is happening. He forgave the murderers, assured the repenting thief and provided words of care and comfort for His mother.

He cried with a loud, clear voice, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*", and then with His head held high He has said, "I thirst!"

Only after telling the world that "*It is finished!*" will His head be bowed in a dignified end to His life.

He knew that all was accomplished and declares it in this one Greek word, "Finished!"

We think of some words as being powerful. Churchill delivered his speech when he said, "We will fight them on the beaches... we will never surrender." Martin Luther King said, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'" Those words, "I have a dream," have been immortalised to inspire us to change the world.

But there are no more significant words in the history of Man than this one word "Finished."

It was a word in common use:

A Servant's Word - Used when a task had been completed.

A Priest's Word - Used when a sacrificial animal was found to be worthy.

A Farmer's Word - Used when a perfect specimen had been born into the flock.

An Artist's Word - Used when the final touches had been applied to a masterpiece.

A Merchant's Word - Used when a deal had been struck and all the haggling had ended. Its usage meant that both parties were satisfied.

When God completed His work in Creation this is what He moved Moses to write:

Genesis 1:31 Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.

The work was done and it looked good, and it was perfect. The Universe was complete and it was perfect. The living world was complete and it was perfect. Man, both male and female, were complete and perfect. And so Moses continues:

Genesis 2:1 Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. 2 And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.

When the translators of the Old Testament Hebrew into Greek wanted to express that the heavens and earth were finished they chose the same root word as Jesus expressed on the cross. All the components of a perfect world were completed, accomplished, and so God ended His work. There was no more to do, and so He rested. He wasn't tired and weary, but He paused and considered that wonderful creation.

When David penned the words of Psalm 22, they began with the words, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" How does it end? *Psalms 22:31 They will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, That He has done this.* The people who have trusted Him will come and declare to future generations *that He has done this.* It is the same idea. The psalm begins with the cry of forsakenness, but also of faith. Part way through, He knows that His cry is heard and He declares: *You have answered Me.* He ends by showing the success of the cross. The message of the evangelists as they proclaim the work of the suffering Saviour who had His hands and feet pierced is, "He has done this!" *He accomplished it! It is finished!*

4000 years later the Saviour could say, John 17:4 "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do." What work had God given to His Son to do?

THE FATHER HAD GIVEN THE WORK OF CREATION TO THE SON. *John 1:3 All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. Colossians 1:16 For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.*

NOW HE HAS GIVEN THE WORK OF REDEMPTION TO THE SON. *Colossians 1:20 and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.*

He repeats the idea in *Hebrews 1:1 God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; 3 who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,*

The word "Finished!" takes us back to creation. It reminds us that when God made everything and finished His work, it was perfect. It was complete.

This word also makes us ask a question about its meaning at Calvary. Hudson Taylor asked that question. Here is his story. We have to travel back to 1849.

A 17 year old young man named James Hudson Taylor had wandered into his father's library, searching for something to read to wile away the time. He came across a gospel tract. He began to read it, thinking, "There will be a story at the beginning and a sermon or moral at the close. I will take the former and leave the latter for those who like it." Meanwhile, 70 miles away, his mother had risen from the dinner table in the home where she was visiting. Deeply concerned for her teenage boy, she went to her room and turned the key in the door, resolving not to leave the spot until her prayers were answered. Hour after hour she pleaded, until at length she could pray no longer, but was constrained to praise God for that which His Spirit taught her had already been accomplished, the conversion of her only son.

He read the words, *the finished work of Christ*. He asked himself, "What was finished?" And he at once replied, 'A full and perfect atonement and satisfaction for sin. Then came the further thought, 'If the whole work was finished, what is there left for me to do?' And with this, he writes, dawned the joyful conviction, as light was flashed into my soul by the Holy Spirit, that there was nothing in the world to be done but to fall down on one's knees and, accepting this Saviour and His salvation, praise Him forevermore. Thus, while my mother was praising God on her knees in her chamber, I was praising Him in the old warehouse to which I had gone alone to read at my leisure this little book."

WHAT IS FINISHED?

Christ said, "*It is finished!*" We shall ask, as Hudson Taylor did, "What is finished?" What is it that has been perfectly accomplished in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ?

We will consider 4 things:

1. The scripture prophecies were complete and perfect

From that first prophecy when God saw the ruin of Man through sin, He promised to send someone. How easy for men and women to be deceived. How easy for a man to rise up and say he is the great saviour.

To this day there have been thousands who have created other gods and made other ways to approach that idol. How often worshippers bring something to appease their god. They have a sense of sin, and they think something must be done. There is an innate idea in the heart that there is a god, they have sinned and there is a judgment day. The scriptures tell us that this is common to all mankind without exception. (Romans 1:19, 32) Without the scriptures Man invents a remedy of his own. He invents a god, creates a method of appeasing him or her and then tries to convince himself all will be well. The three ways these religions work is either that a ceremony saves, or that a sacrifice saves or that serving the god saves.

But the scriptures tell us that Man cannot save Himself. God must provide the remedy for sin, and that God promised the remedy for sin, but more importantly, God *is* the remedy for sin.

To this day there have been thousands who say they are just the deliverer that a nation or that the world needs. Caesar was to be worshipped as a god. Hitler would build an empire where the superior race could rule for a thousand years. Mohammed said that he was the last and greatest prophet and that he is promised by the writings of the Old Testament.

Because Man is so easily deceived and led astray by those who claim to be the saviour they need, or that are bringing the message they need, God prepared the way through the 4000 years from the creation and fall to the coming of Christ.

PROPHECY

The first way is by direct and detailed prophecy. These are so detailed that listing them would take all our time.

When would He come? Daniel tells us that it would be after the fall of Babylon, Persia and Greece. It would be during the time when Rome ruled.

Where would He be born? In Bethlehem, yet come from Egypt and be called a Nazarene?

Who would He be? He would be a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah and David. His mother would be a virgin, and therefore He would have no earthly father. He would be David's Lord as well as David's son, the Son of God as well as the Son of Man, the mighty God, the One existing from eternity, Jehovah sent by Jehovah.

What would He do? Through Him the blind would see, the lame would walk, the poor would hear good news. He would open His mouth in parables.

How would He die? He would be betrayed by a friend for 30 pieces of silver, be forsaken by His friends, his back lashed, His face beaten, His hands and feet pierced, die between criminals and be buried in a rich man's tomb.

Why would He die? He would be wounded for our transgression, bruised for our iniquities. He would be dying because the Lord was pleased to bruise Him. He would die because we like sheep have gone astray and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Imagine I said to you, "In 50 years time please go to Milnrow station on the 23rd August at 11am promptly and you will meet a 20 year old man wearing a blue coat, brown shoes and black trousers, named William McPherson who is a Phd scientist in aerospace engineering, working for a company called Bryants will be formed in 35 years in Michigan, USA." How could I know that? Yet, on that day as an old man or woman, you go, and there to your utter astonishment there stands William! What would you think? You would say, "He's a true prophet!" He described in detail something no one could have known.

When Christ said, "*It is finished!*" not one of the prophecies about His birth life and death were unfulfilled. Not one of them was wrong.

The prophecies of scripture were fulfilled. The detailed description was perfect. We need not be deceived about Jesus Christ. He alone is the Messiah, the Son of God. God has come to save us, by becoming one of us, except He was without sin.

PICTURE

Not only did God describe the promised Saviour but He pictured what He would be and do through ceremonies. The people would bring a lamb and that lamb must be absolutely perfect. It must have no spot, scab or blemish. The lamb would be brought before the place God had said He would dwell. A priest

would take it and kill it, but only after the worshipper had confessed their sins over it. The sinner could then worship. The sacrifice would then be treated as if it was the sinner. This is the main picture acted out to show what the promised Saviour would be and do. He would be the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. He would bear the wrath of God in place of the sinner.

Many other illustrations were drawn in ceremonies and situations in the Old Testament. Why? So that we would understand why the Saviour would come, what He would be and how He would die as a substitute and sacrifice for sin.

PREFIGURED

The Scriptures also prefigured the Saviour. Many people were like Him in one way or another, but there were three types of people that prefigured all that Christ would be.

The Old Testament describes three great problems, three great remedies and three types of people who were anointed to provide that remedy.

The first problem is described by Moses in the first five books of the Bible. The problem is sin. The remedy is a sacrifice. The person anointed to offer that sacrifice for sin is a priest. We need a priest to offer a sacrifice for our sin. The Old Testament priests had a problem. They were sinners. They needed firstly to offer a sacrifice for themselves. They prefigured the anointed Messiah, but they were not the promised Messiah. Jesus is our sinless priest. He has come to offer one sacrifice for sin.

The second problem is described in the history books of the Old Testament. From Joshua to Esther there is the story of Man's anarchy. Man is a rebel. The remedy to anarchy is authority. The remedy for rebellion is God's rule in our lives. Anarchy and authority, but who brings that authority? A king is anointed and He brings authority into the anarchy of the period of the judges. But though He is like the promised anointed Messiah he has a problem. David was a rebel too. He had anarchy in his heart. So did Solomon, Rehoboam, and every other king sent to bring God's authority into Man's anarchy. Yet One came who was not a rebel. He delighted to do God's will. He was no anarchist, and He came to bring authority. Christ is the promised King.

The third problem is ignorance. We do not know God. Adam knew God, but all that perfect knowledge was lost and now we need instruction. We need inspired instruction. From Job to Malachi we have a group of inspired teaching books of the Old Testament. The men who brought that teaching were anointed prophets. They prefigured the promised prophet, but they too had a problem. They were ignorant. They searched their own writings to see what, or what manner of time the Spirit was indicating when He moved them to write of the sufferings of the Christ and the glory that would follow. When Christ came He was the anointed prophet. He didn't interpret anything, He inspired it. Seventy six times the Gospels record Him saying, "Assuredly I say to you." Or "Most assuredly I say to you." He said five times, "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you." He was the anointed prophet. We are ignorant, He brings instruction. Hebrews 1 says:

1 God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.

The Old Testament prophets gave various introductions, but he gave the finale. He put the full stop at the end of revelation. Nothing should be taken from it and nothing added.

In these three ways, prophecy, picture and people prefiguring Christ we see who He is and what He has done.

When Jesus said, *"It is finished!"* the Scripture prophecies were complete and perfect. Nothing was left unfulfilled up to this moment. Yes there were prophecies of resurrection, of ascension and His return in glory. But at this point He could properly declare of the scripture prophecies, *"It is finished!"*

2. Christ's obedience was complete and perfect

Why had Jesus Christ come?

He said to Pilate: *John 18:37 "For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."*

He summarised it Himself in these words: *John 6:38 "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me."*

Matthew 20:28 "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

First, He was sinless by nature. He was not contaminated as we are. He was not immune to temptation, because He (*Hebrews 4:15*) *was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin*. There was no area of human experience where He was not tempted to yield. Pride, impatience, gossip, revenge, greed, sinful anger, depression, fornication, laziness, worldliness, unbelief, godlessness—we are tempted in each way that our human nature can sin, we are tempted to sin. No human being can say, "Jesus doesn't understand the pressures I have to face." No one can say, "He doesn't know what I am going through." He was sinless by nature, but He knew the power and seductive force of temptation in a way you will never know.

Think of it. You squeeze a lemon. Almost immediately it yields. You don't have to use much force. But what if you want to break open a coconut? You have to use much more force until it yields. What then if you want to break a rock? Your ability to resist temptation requires only the least powerful or seductive devil to throw a temptation your way. He only needs whisper in your ear, and the likelihood is that you would yield. But what kind of force and pressure of temptation must the Saviour have endured as He said, "No!" and Satan increased the pressure. Who would win in the battle?

Don't think Christ did not suffer. Remember Job. His health, wealth and family are all destroyed by Satan in order to cause him to sin and deny the Lord. Would you have survived? Yet he stood the test. He resisted, even though he hesitated. Satan threw powerful trials and temptations at him. How much more, then, was thrown at the Lord as He said, "No!" again and again. Satan ratcheted up the pressure and still He doesn't yield. The force of temptation is as great as Satan can muster, yet Christ resists. He may have resisted, but do not think He did not feel the force of the temptation.

Sin comprises two aspects. We sin when we do those things we ought not to do. Christ never sinned in this way.

But sin is also when we do not do the things we ought to do. We are not merely to keep the commandment by not stealing, not lying and not coveting or committing adultery. We are called on to positively love God with all our hearts. We are commanded to love our neighbours. Righteousness is not merely the absence of evil acts, but the presence of good ones.

We can remind ourselves that He did not commit any sin: *Hebrews 4:15 (He) was tempted in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.*

Hebrews 7:26 (He) is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners.

Isaiah 53:9 And they made His grave with the wicked... Because He had done no violence, Nor was any deceit in His mouth.

2 Corinthians 5:21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us.

1 Peter 2:22 "Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth";

1 John 3:5 And you know that... in Him there is no sin.

He asked His accusers: *John 8:46 "Which of you convicts Me of sin?"*

Therefore He did no sin, but did He love God and love His neighbour? The Scriptures answer clearly:

Acts 10:38 "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him."

God said of Him when, *Luke 3:22 a voice came from heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased."*

God was pleased that He did not sin, but the Saviour did more than passively resist sin. He said, *Psalms 40:8 "I delight to do Your will, O my God, And Your law [is] within my heart."*

Phillipians 2 shows this completing of His righteousness.

5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

God had required Him to lay down His own life for sinners. His love for God and His love for sinners led Him to Calvary where the great transaction took place and our sin became His and His righteousness became ours.

2 Corinthians 5:21 For He made Him who knew no sin [to be] sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 1 Corinthians 1:30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God — and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

Therefore, when we ask “What is finished?” we answer, “Christ’s obedience was complete and perfect.” Yet there is a third aspect to this.

3. Christ’s sufferings were complete and perfect

The greatest blasphemy against Christ in the world today is the denial of this truth that his sufferings were complete and perfect. No! says the pope of Rome. He has to suffer every time there is a mass in that the mass is the same sacrifice of Calvary presented to God in an unbloody manner. This leads to the whole system where a person’s pardon is only partial. Mary’s righteousness and the ‘saints’ righteousness also contribute to our righteousness. Christ’s righteousness is evidently not enough.

But, what does the Bible say.

Romans 6:10 For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all.

Hebrews 7:27 (He) does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.

Hebrews 9:12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.

1 Peter 3:18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit.

He suffered once, and His sufferings are over: “It is finished!” His sufferings are complete and perfect. They were infinite.

They accomplished all they were intended to. Think of it: thousands of lambs were sacrificed and yet there was always a reminder of sin. If they had to offer another, tomorrow, next week or next year, then the suffering sacrifice was not enough.

But Christ suffered once for all. He entered the Holy Place once for all. He offered up Himself as the substitutionary sacrifice once for all.

His sacrifice was enough. It did the job. When a lamb was offered, it wasn’t finished. When the Lamb was offered it was finished. Hudson Taylor was right, “a full and perfect atonement for sin.” That is what had been accomplished at the cross. We need no other priest, and we need no other sacrifice.

We can view Christ’s death using 4 great Biblical words:

1. PROPITIATION: God is angry with sin, but the Saviour has appeased that anger and taken it all in Himself. There is none left to fall on the saved sinner.
2. JUSTIFICATION: I am a criminal before the Judge of the whole earth. In Christ I have entered the court and faced the judgment and penalty of sin. Now God is just and yet declares me justified and righteous in His sight. I am acquitted. There is no record of my crimes.
3. REDEMPTION: My debts are infinite. I owe God what I can never pay, and yet the Redeemer has been before the One I owe this debt to and it is dealt with. When I look at the invoice I see it is stamped with the words, “Paid in full”. I am set free from this great burden.

4. RECONCILIATION: this speaks of my alienation from God. There is a barrier, an issue, an offense. Christ becomes the Mediator. He does not make me come half way and God comes half way. It isn't that God gives a little and I give a little. Christ does something. He takes away the cause of the issue. You see the issue is not that I have a problem with God. The problem is that I have done something and God has a problem with me. Yet at the cross, our Mediator did something that takes away the alienation and brings reconciliation.

In these four words we see how perfectly Christ's sufferings have remedied our sins. God has retained His honour and glory. He has not compromised His holiness and justice, yet He has provided for sinners to be saved and it is all through the once-for-all sufferings of Christ as our sacrifice and substitute.

This leads us to one further implication in the words, *"It is finished!"*

4. Our salvation is complete and perfect.

Whatever God begins He completes. He began the work of creation and completed it. Not until it was complete did He rest. He also began the work of redemption and completed it at the cross. Only when He cried, "It is finished!" did He lay back His head and rest in death.

But, He also begins another work:

Philippians 1:6 being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Before you were ever saved, God was at work. All things were working together for your salvation.

Sovereign ruler of the skies!
Ever gracious ever wise!
All our times are in Your hands
Ordered by Your wise commands.

***His decrees who form'd the earth,
Fixed my first and second birth;
Parents, native-place, and time,
All appointed were by him.***

You have formed me by thy power;
You will guide me, hour by hour;
All my times shall ever be
Ordered by Your wise decree:

Times of sickness and of health;
Times of poverty and wealth;
Times of trial and of grief,
Or of triumph and relief;

Times the tempter's power to prove;
Times to taste the Saviour's love:
All must come, and last, and end,
As shall please our heavenly Friend.

He is gracious, wise, and just,
In His hands our lives we trust:
We and ours are all His own,
May His holy will be done.

This hymn tells us that God's work for us begins before we are even born. His eternal decree shapes our place of birth, circumstances, opportunities and outcomes. Think of the small events that led you to Christ. A conversation, an advert, a leaflet, an invitation—such things are signs of God working for you.

But to save you He must work within you. He must begin a good work in you. He brings conviction of sin, righteousness and judgment. He works within you to will and to do His good pleasure. He grants you repentance. You are saved by the gift of grace, through faith, which is also a gift. He brings you to new birth which is a result of His work. He is active, you are passive. When Jesus said, "You must be born again." Remember, you did not conceive yourself. You did not cause yourself to be born.

Then there is the work of sanctification. Everything that is good in you is the consequence of His ongoing work. Are you growing in *Galatians 5:22 love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, (and) self-control?* That is the work of the Spirit within you.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians and underlined this work in the heart saying *1 Thessalonians 2:13 when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed [it] not [as] the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.*

The Spirit and the Word are at work in the soul.

You have come to faith, you are growing in fruitfulness, but you will arrive safely at home.

Jesus said: John 6:39 "This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. John 10:28 "And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. John 3:18 "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

When our Saviour said those words, "*It is finished!*" There was one man next to Him who could await His own death with peace and assurance. Three hours earlier he had said, "Lord, remember me when You come into your kingdom." He heard the welcoming and welcome words, "Assuredly, I say to you, today, you shall be with me in Paradise." Darkness and silence followed. Then a fearful cry breaks the silence, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Terrible words for a dying sinner who had placed all his hopes in the assurances of this Man, Jesus. But then come those words, "*It is finished!*" It is done, it is accomplished, it is completed. As Jesus lays back His head in death, the dying thief can lay down his own head in assurance that everything that is necessary to save him has been done.

He doesn't have to worry about things he has stolen that he cannot take back. He doesn't have to worry about words he has said that he cannot take back. He cannot do anything. But, he doesn't have to do anything. Jesus has done everything.

When you go to sleep tonight, close your eyes with the words, "*It is finished!* There is nothing left for me to do. He has done it all." When you come to the end of your journey, and you close your eyes for the last time, remember these words, "*It is finished!*" As your eyes close in death your spirit will go from this sad and sinful world to the welcoming smile of the Saviour. The salvation He completed at Calvary was enough. It was enough to cleanse you, change you, and keep you.

Romans 8:30 tells us that those *whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.*

Our salvation is complete and perfect, but on what basis? It is built on the reality that what was done for us by Christ at Calvary was complete and perfect. Listen:

31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? 33 Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." 37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Friends, *"It is finished!"* Trust Him. Rest in Him. Stop fretting and worrying. Stop doubting and questioning. Nothing you have done is too bad. He has covered it all. It is as far as East is from West. It is buried in the depths of the ocean. He will never bring it to remembrance.

Rest your uneasy conscience in this truth. And with the assurance of these words you can face life, death and eternity. You can face Satan's accusations and God's judgment seat. Your eternal salvation has been fully and finally accomplished.

7.

LUKE 23:46 AND WHEN JESUS HAD CRIED OUT WITH A LOUD VOICE, HE SAID, "FATHER, 'INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT.'" HAVING SAID THIS, HE BREATHED HIS LAST.

Seven times the Saviour spoke from the cross. To the Father for the crowd's forgiveness. To the thief for his assurance of salvation. To His mother for her security. The central utterance declares the purpose and the mystery of Calvary, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" Rapidly following this, this unbowed sovereign knows that He been victorious, He knows that all has been accomplished and so He declares, "I thirst!" and with His mouth moistened by the vinegar wine, He shouts the one word, "Finished." Not, "I am finished!" but "*It is finished!*" The dying thief can die with the full assurance of salvation.

Finally, He says, "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.*"

These words are so full of help for us.

They speak of His sovereignty

Despite Man's arrogance and confidence Man cannot control the real issues of life and death. He can marry and want children, but *children are a heritage of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is His reward*. It is God who opens and closes the womb.

Man can take all the steps to have children, but it is God who gives the increase.

Man also can take life and end his own life. But he cannot, in any real sense control life. We live, says the Lord, for three score and ten years. Maybe we can get to fourscore years, but it is full of trouble. Even the oldest of us become like the doddery person of Ecclesiastes. The grinders cease, everything grows dark, pleasures fade, and man is headed for what the bible calls *his long home* – his grave.

But in the end Man is not in control of his own death. How, when, where and even why he dies is outside his power. *Psalms 22:29 All the prosperous of the earth Shall eat and worship; All those who go down to the dust Shall bow before Him, Even he who cannot keep himself alive.*

Psalm 22 tells us that one day every knee will bow to the Lord Jesus Christ, but specifically those who go down to the dust, who cannot keep themselves alive.

4000 years before the Lord Jesus went to the Cross, Adam sinned. He had been warned that, *16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."* The sad story unfolds as Eve is deceived, but Adam deliberately chooses sin, and with it, death. In the very day he ate he died spiritually. His first son, Cain, was born alive, but dead in sin. His second son, Abel, was born alive, but dead in sin.

Cain then murdered Abel. He went down to the dust. But no matter how long Adam, Cain or anyone else lived we read the sad tale of the world as a graveyard for sinners in Genesis 5

5 So all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years; and he died.

Even the man whose age outstripped everyone could not keep himself alive forever:

5:27 So all the days of Methuselah were nine hundred and sixty-nine years; and he died.

The psalmist asked the question: *Psalms 89:48 What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his life from the power of the grave?* The answer is obvious. The chance of winning the lottery is 1 in 14 million, but the chance of dying is 1 in 1. We have no power over death. It is called the Grim Reaper.

The story is told of a man, John Doe, who was in the market in Rochdale one day when he saw the Grim Reaper - death. The Reaper looked surprised. John realised that he was on the Reaper's list and ran home, packed his bags and fled to Leeds that very afternoon. Someone watching the situation unfold said to the Grim Reaper, Death, "Why did you look so surprised when you saw John Doe in the market?" Death replied, "I was surprised to see him here, as I have an appointment with him in Leeds this evening."

How true then is the gloomy conclusion of Ecclesiastes 8:

8 No one has power over the spirit to retain the spirit, And no one has power in the day of death. There is no release from that war, And wickedness will not deliver those who are given to it.

We have no control over how we die, where we die and when we die?

Some seek to take control. They commit suicide. It is as if they are saying, "I'll die when I choose." But none of us, by choosing, can simply release our spirit. Neither can we by an act of will stay alive, nor by a simple act of our will end our lives. We have to do violence to our body to ourselves to do that.

Job came to the point where he preferred death to life, things were so bad, but he expressed it in these words:

Job 14:13 "Oh, that You would hide me in the grave, That You would conceal me until Your wrath is past, That You would appoint me a set time, and remember me!"

But, we all know that power over life and death belongs to God.

Deuteronomy 32:39 'Now see that I, even I, am He, And there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; Nor is there any who can deliver from My hand.

1 Samuel 2:6 "The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up.

And so I come to the point.

Man cannot keep himself alive. It is God who does it. *Psalms 30:3 O LORD, ... You have kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit.* Man cannot prevent His death. *Hebrews 9:27 And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.* Since the fall of Adam, *Ecclesiastes 3:19 For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. 20 All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust.*

This is why these words of the Lord speak of His sovereignty.

He chose the moment of His death. He retained His life until He released His life.

How can we say that? Look at how His death is described:

Matthew 27:50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.

He dismissed His spirit. He gave up His spirit. He voluntarily died at that moment. Here is how one Christian pastor described the moment:

He himself willingly gave up that life which it was impossible for man to take away. It is not said that he hung on the cross till he died through pain and agony; nor is it said that his bones were broken, the sooner to put him out of pain, and to hasten his death; but that himself dismissed the soul, that he might thus become, not a forced sacrifice, but a free-will offering for sin. (Adam Clarke)

Luke 23:46 And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, "Father, 'into Your hands I commit My spirit.'" Having said this, He breathed His last. The original says, "He breathed out." It is a statement full of meaning physically, in that our last breath is breathed out, but it takes us right back to the creation of man. *Genesis 2:7 And the LORD God formed man [of] the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.* Man's body was created, but into his body was breathed, as it is in Hebrew, "the breath of lives." Man has both a physical and spiritual life. He has a body and spirit. The body is from the dust. The spirit is from the deity. At death the body returns to the dust, but the spirit returns to God who gave it. Man is not merely an animal. Here Jesus by an act of breathing His last breath

John records the event with the words:

John 19:30 So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.

He gave His spirit *into the hands of another*. That is the force of these words. His spirit wasn't taken, it was given. His spirit didn't wander through the earth. His spirit did not descend to hades to preach the gospel to those who died in the flood as some have said in an unusual and unbiblical interpretation of Peter's epistle. He gave His spirit to the care of the Father as His words themselves declare.

This last moment is therefore a voluntary act. He has power over death, over His death and over the moment of His death. The truth is expressed in His own words *John 10:18* "No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."

In a sovereign and voluntary act, having suffered as our substitutionary sacrifice, he chooses now to die. His body must go to the grave. His spirit must go to glory. He has a meeting that evening with the dying thief in Paradise.

This is completely consistent with what we know of Christ. *John 1:4* In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. *John 5:26* "For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself. *John 14:6* Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

We come to the One who died for us. He faced eternal death and punishment, and He faced physical death. He chose to die. He chose where, how, and when.

He is displaying to us that He is the Lord of life.

What wonderful truth this is for us. He is in control of life and death. He gave you your life. He will sustain it until His chosen moment for you to leave the world. You believers can look to Him as Steven did and say, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," "Into your hands I commit my spirit."

How confident we can be in Him:

Romans 8:37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. *38* For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, *39* nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

How wonderful that knowing that He is sovereign at death, in death and over death, we can face it. Yes, it is our last enemy. But it has been defeated at the cross. It has been disarmed at the cross. It has no weapon that can hurt anyone who is in Christ. Listen to these final words of believers:

John Owen: "I am going to Him whom my soul loveth, or rather who has loved me with an everlasting love, which is the sole ground of all my consolation."

D. L. Moody: "I see earth receding; heaven is opening. God is calling me."

Martin Luther: "Into Thy hands I commend my spirit! Thou hast redeemed me, O God of truth."

John Wesley, preacher and songwriter: "The best of all is that God is with us, farewell, farewell."

David Brainerd, (well known missionary): "I am going into eternity and it is sweet to me to think of eternity."

Sir Michael Faraday, (brilliant English scientist 1791 – 1867), was asked when he was near death: "What are your speculations now?" He answered: I have no speculations. I rest upon Jesus Christ who died, and rose again from death."

Is this your assurance? Have you come to the One who is sovereign in death and sovereign over death?

These words not only speak of His sovereignty, they also speak of His humanity.

They speak of His humanity

Solomon wrote that in death: *Ecclesiastes 12:7 the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God who gave it.*

What is man? Are we advanced animals? Do we have a soul or spirit? What is death?

The Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and a huge proportion of those who want to call themselves Christian, but who deny the teaching of eternal conscious punishment do so by saying that man has a body, a mind and breath. At death, they say, a man ceases to exist. He is a corpse. There is no immaterial part of him, no conscious spirit. If there is a resurrection it is after God recreates you from His memory. You do not continue, they say, after you die.

But the language of the death of Christ, apart from anything else, denies this. When would the dying thief be with the Saviour? "Today..." What was life to the apostle? *2 Corinthians 5:6 while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord.* What was death to the apostle Paul? *2 Corinthians 5:8 We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.* His body would be in the grave, but where was he?

For Paul, there was advantage in death, not annihilation. *Philippians 1:21 For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.* For Him, to be here was not to be there, to be here with you is to be absent from the actual presence of the Lord Jesus. *Philippians 1:23 For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.* How encouraging for us as we come to terms with our mortality that death is leaving here and going there to be with the Lord, like that dying thief.

Death is described in various ways in our Bibles. It is a departure. We are going somewhere. We are not going nowhere. We leave something behind. *2 Peter 1:14 knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me.* Notice the language. The body is a tent. The real me lives inside the tent. Don't think of a little tent that a camper lives in. Think of the home of a nomad. It is his house. Everything that gives him comfort here is carried round, and each day he pitches his tent. But the day comes when he will die and it is that the real him or her, puts off that tent.

Steven saw the Lord waiting for him. He said, "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.*" Lazarus, who died at a rich man's door was in paradise. The dying thief was going to a real somewhere to meet a real someone.

And so, as Jesus breathes His last breath, He finally lays His head upon the cross as if He has simply fallen asleep. His body is there. His spirit has been dismissed into the care of the Father.

He has control of death. His death in His human nature was completely in His own hands. This is so practical for us. The One who had control of death walks with you through the valley of the shadow of death. You need fear no evil. He is with you.

They speak of His humility

These few final words from the cross also speak of His humility.

Philippians 2:5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

Paul describes the Lord's humility. He humbled Himself by coming into the world.

God, contracted to a span, Incomprehensibly made man.

But He took another step down. He became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

We can properly say that His life was taken.

*Acts 8:33 In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is **taken** from the earth."*

We can equally say that His life was given.

Matthew 20:28 "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.

His life was given, but it was not given reluctantly and unwillingly. We can also say that His life was laid down.

John 10:17 "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again.

The Lord is not only praying Himself, He forces us to look back 1000 years earlier to Psalms 31:5 where he moved David to write:

Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD God of truth.

The point is simple. We can pray this prayer. Many from this church have gone before us. Think of Victor, George, Donald, Bill, Eunice, Dorothy, Alethia and others. Yet there have been those who were younger too. As they came to the end of their journey they did not say, "I did it my way." Earlier this week someone assured me that they always helped others and did their best with acts of kindness as they anticipated the judgment day confident that the softest pillow to rest their dying head on was their confidence they were good enough.

Those who know Christ are sure that as they leave this world they can entrust their soul into Christ's hands. Why? Because they know very well that they entrusted it to Him for safety long before. Can you remember that time when you began to rest in Christ? Can you remember a time since when you couldn't face death with peace?

Death is called our last enemy, but Christ has killed it! *The sting of death is sin*, says the scripture, but Christ has pulled the sting. The story is told of a man whose child was being terrified by a bee that was buzzing round her. The man cupped his hands and caught the bee which promptly stung him. He showed the frightened child the bee. It pulled itself free from the man, but the sting was left in his hand. "Don't worry now," he said, "The bee cannot sting twice." Death stung our Saviour.

How does He now describe our death? It is a sleep. 1 Thessalonians 4 13^{ff} is clear. They have only fallen asleep. They have said, "Goodnight." Their tired or tormented bodies are resting, but their souls are not resting. Their souls are, even now, with the Lord.

The Lord died first, and went to Paradise. He waited a little while and then, set free from the body as his legs were broken by the cruel soldiers, the unnamed thief left a world of sin and suffering, to be with the Lord he had only met for a few brief moments before. A few months later another soul entered His presence, *Acts 7:59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."*

And so it is, that each one of us, poor and weak as we may be, have entrusted our souls to Christ, so that on that day when we draw our last breath we can say:

2 Timothy 1:12 ... I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.

It is only when we know we can die with confidence that we can live with confidence. Trust Him. Trust the One who holds the keys of death and hades. Trust the One who holds you in His hands. Trust Him and say, *Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD God of truth.*