

The seven sayings of Jesus on the cross

Jim Vickers

WITH ARMS outstretched and hands bearing the impress of the nails, our Lord said seven things, the perfect number of sayings by the perfect man; and, as we shall see, they were said for perfect reasons.

Incredible though it may seem, the first three sayings of our Lord amidst his agony concerned other people. The first saying was to God on behalf of his murderers: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34). The second was to the thief: "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (v. 43). The third saying was to his mother: "Woman, behold thy son!"; and to the disciple John: "Behold thy mother!" (Jno. 19:26,27).

After those three sayings there fell the three hours of darkness, from the sixth to the ninth hour of the day, during which no word was spoken and none are recorded. Then, after the darkness, the last four sayings of Jesus come very quickly, in the space of just a few minutes, and this time all concerning himself: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (Mt. 27:46); "I thirst" (Jno. 19:28); "It is finished" (v. 30); and last of all: "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit" (Lk. 23:46).

The whole dreadful period of the crucifixion of our Lord lasted from nine o'clock in morning until three o'clock in the afternoon our time, approximately, and appropriately, the times of the morning and the evening sacrifices. This period, of course, includes those three hours of darkness that took place from twelve noon until three o'clock in the afternoon. Then the end came very quickly, along with the last four sayings of Jesus.

Those first three sayings concerning other people show that Jesus, even amidst his agony, had deep concern and sympathy for others, which is so marvellous under the conditions that we hardly dare talk about it. The following darkness covered the whole land, the land where the people were putting out the light of the world by a dreadful act. It is possibly only then that we see the terrible mental agony of our Lord, when his mind turns to the Word of God in his extreme sorrow.

Possibly in this is to be seen our first exhortation from this study: where to turn to in our

times of trouble, if we dare even mention them as compared with the trouble which our Lord went through on our behalf. All the while he was being reviled they were saying things like: 'If you are the Christ, why don't you come down from the cross?'. All this time he had the power to save himself, and yet he knew he must not, because if he saved himself then he could not save us.

So we contemplate the perfect man, saying the perfect things, making the perfect sacrifice, showing silence in the face of reviling, pity for a thief, concern for his mother, compassion for a beloved disciple and forgiveness for his murderers. Let us remember his sayings as weekly we approach the table of the Lord.

The first saying: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34)

Commentators have it, and I feel that this may well be true, that Jesus said this not just once but many times. Perhaps these were his shouts of agony as they drove in the nails, as they lifted the cross and thumped it into the hole in the ground. As a mortal being he would have been as sensitive to pain as we are; and whereas we would probably just scream and scream, he used his breath to say those words: 'Father, forgive them, forgive them, forgive them: they don't know what they're doing'.

The scribes who copied the record of the incident left these words out of some of the early manuscripts, surely through a sense of shame and guilt. Actually, of course, his words are a fulfilment of the prophecy by Isaiah: "he . . . made intercession for the transgressors" (53:12).

It was, however, for more than just the soldiers that he prayed, because the request, "forgive them", really involved every member of the human race; without this perfect sacrifice we would not have the hope we do. Even such a one as Abraham would have died without hope. No wonder Jesus said, "they know not what they do"; but look what a tremendous impact it made upon the disciples! Peter and John, when brought before the Jewish Council in Jerusalem six weeks later, were saying: 'We hope that you are doing it through ignorance, brethren' (see Acts 3:17). Even the Apostle Paul could never forget the

part he played when he said: 'I persecuted the brethren and sisters at one time; but, Lord, I did it through ignorance. I need forgiveness' (see 1 Timothy 1:13).

What a lesson is taught by Jesus, to make excuses for his executioners when he knew that he was innocent all the time, and when others, surely, knew that he was innocent as well! The priests and the rulers knew, deep in their hearts, that it was an innocent man they were nailing to the cross. Judas knew: "I have betrayed the innocent blood" (Mt. 27:4). They all knew he was innocent.

What about us? Should we forgive our brethren and sisters when we think they do us wrong? It is hardly worth mentioning really, is it? How wonderful that Jesus put into practice his own teaching upon the subject of forgiveness! You remember the time when Peter came to him and said: "how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?" and Jesus said: "not . . . Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven" (Mt. 18:21,22); which means always and for ever. So Jesus said: "Love your enemies . . . pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (5:44). Thus, on the cross, he was able to say: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do".

Those words certainly impressed the disciple Stephen, because, while he was being stoned, he said a very similar thing: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:60). If Jesus could say that for them, then what a wonderful hope we have of having our sins forgiven if we will admit them!

The second saying: "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Lk. 23:43)

The second saying was to the repentant thief. It was probably a considerable time after his first words that this conversation took place. After the fixing to the cross and the first saying, Jesus uttered no words during the first hours of pain. This silence would, no doubt, have had a tremendous effect on all the people around. We remember that it was his silence that disturbed both Pilate and the high priest. Pilate said to him, "Speakest thou not unto me?" (Jno. 19:10).

So on the cross the silence of Jesus made itself felt upon the two malefactors who railed on him at first, and no doubt the language would have been pretty awful. Isaiah 53 records: "he was

numbered with the transgressors"; and, "as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth" (vv. 12,7). There is a lesson for us here as well. The dignity of silence is beautifully put in Ecclesiastes 3; there is "a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh . . . a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (vv. 1-7).

Jesus did not lash back at his tormentors, and it was only when the thief asked for mercy that Jesus broke his silence. I feel sure it was because of his silent dignity that the thief suddenly saw the light, and said: "this man hath done nothing amiss . . . Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" (Lk. 23:41,42). Now was the time to speak: "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise". Surely this was a very wonderful man.

The third saying: "Woman, behold thy son! . . . Behold thy mother!" (Jno. 19:26,27)

The scenes around the cross would keep changing as some of the priests would have to leave because duties in the temple demanded their attention. The Passover time was approaching and Jerusalem was crowded with people. Joseph tells us that there were about two million there at the time of the crucifixion. That is approximately the same number as came out of Egypt long before. As the clamour around the cross died down, those closest to Jesus would come nearer to the foot of the cross. They are named as John, Mary the mother of Jesus, Salome (Mary's sister), Mary the wife of Clopas (Cleophas) and Mary Magdalene.

Have you ever imagined what would have been the thought in the mind of Jesus's mother as she saw him there? Would she be thinking of the angel's message of thirty-three years ago? Do you think she would remember that bright little boy in the temple answering the questions, or the confident young man at the wedding in Cana of Galilee? I am sure she would be thinking of all those things, and now this; but she would have known what it was all about. Think of the other women as well. There was Salome, Jesus's aunt, who had one day asked, "Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom" (Mt. 20:21). She had obviously borne her rebuke well, because she was there to the last. Mary the wife of Clopas, one of the loyal party later to visit the tomb, was there, and Mary

Magdalene, a lesson in gratitude and love. Jesus looked down and saw that they were there, as well as John the disciple.

Once again his thoughtfulness is beyond our description. He knew what a wonderful woman his mother was, and he loved John very much, but knew that he was not yet fully matured into the full stature of a man in Christ Jesus, as he was later to become. Jesus knew how valuable Mary had been to himself in his own upbringing; and so to John, in spite of Mary having at least six other children, Jesus said: "Behold thy mother!". From that time we read that John took her into his own home, to help her, and in return to receive all the tremendous encouragement and wisdom from that wonderful woman that Jesus had received himself. Similarly to Mary he said: "Behold thy son!". John later became the very mature person we know who recorded the Gospel, the letters and the Revelation.

Thus, with these three sayings completed, all concerning other people, the darkness came for three long hours, three hours of silence and misery.

The fourth saying: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (Mt. 27:46)

It is only when the light starts to lift that Jesus speaks again, this time for himself. First there is a cry of anguish, which has surely been uttered by most members of the human race in times of trouble: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?". This is at the centre of the sayings of Jesus and, in a way, the hardest to understand. It is possible that he was concentrating his mind fully on the Word of God in order to shut out what he was going through, and that he was quoting Psalm 22 and remembering the prophecy about his agony.

On the other hand, think of the whole period again; in the first three hours three sayings are recorded, then follows the three hours of darkness during which no words are recorded. Then, immediately after the darkness begins to lift, the last four sayings are uttered in rapid succession within a very few minutes before he dies, just before the offering of the evening sacrifice. Consequently I believe that the meaning of that saying can be found in those three hours of darkness.

What does darkness represent? Think of examples in the Old Testament: Abraham's horror of the darkness, and Jonah's three days of darkness. Darkness represents death, and the fact that

it was three hours is also significant. Even the priests remembered the importance of three: "we remember that that deceiver said . . . After three days I will rise again" (Mt. 27:63). Thus in a way the three hours of darkness were representative of the three days of death that were to come; darkness and death, the punishments for sin, the places where God is not.

So, in death, and in its representation in those three long hours of darkness, which were surely sent to help Jesus, we have the only time and the only place where Jesus could be separated, could be cut off, from his Father. It is only when the light begins to appear again that Jesus can connect with God again. Then the cry is forced from his lips: "why hast Thou forsaken me?". Because Jesus would want the light, the light of reassurance, to come back into his life so very much, he must have been waiting for the time it should appear. As that time approached he wanted it to come, even though we can see now that in a physical sense the darkness would have been a great blessing to him.

The words of John the Baptist put the focus on the whole thing: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (Jno. 1:29). On the cross Jesus became the sin-bearer, the perfect sacrifice to take away the sin of the world; the atonement, the covering, the shedding of blood. Think of the significance of all these things, think of what he was now doing: "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (Isa. 53:4); "He hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21). He was the sin-bearer, and a sin-bearer cannot stand in the presence of God.

In this sense Jesus was cut off from his Father, which makes the full horror of sin brutally apparent as our innocent Lord cries in his anguish: 'My God where are You? Why have You forsaken me?'. As we sometimes sing: "There was no other good enough / To pay the price of sin" (Hymn 168); and again: "Was it for me thy flesh was wounded sore . . . ?" (Hymn 169). So what kind of tribute should we make as we approach the table of the Lord?

The fifth saying: "I thirst" (Jno. 19:28)

Then Jesus said, "I thirst". That was the fifth of his sayings. Was it not rare for Jesus to ask any personal service? Only twice he asked for a drink, once from the Samaritan woman at the well and this time on the cross. It was not a complaint by

Jesus, of course, it was just a statement of fact. The thirst of crucifixion must have been a dreadful thing. Jesus would have suffered from it no more and no less than we would have done, being of our nature.

I wonder if the thought had crossed his mind about the parable he had spoken not so long previously, in which he depicted himself saying to the rejected, "I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink" (Mt. 25:42). We must remember the awful conclusion of the parable: "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me" (v. 45). Jesus said, "I thirst", and could do nothing about it. He could only wait and see if someone would respond. In a way, we are that someone, because the opportunity is always there for us to give to him by giving to the least of his brethren. We are told that just one did respond: "one ran and filled a sponge full of vinegar . . . and gave him to drink". All the rest said, "Let alone" (Mk. 15:36).

I believe that there are two reasons why Jesus asked for the drink. The main one was to wet his lips and his throat for the next thing that he wanted to do and say, a shout of triumph and victory: 'I have completed my work'. I think we can begin to see joy and glory at this stage, even amid the pain. The other reason, of course, is that it fulfils Psalm 69:21, which says: "in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink". What a wonderful book the Bible is! Is it not remarkable how these prophecies were fulfilled in every detail?—for vinegar, or sour wine, was the drink of the common people, the poor of this world, whom Jesus certainly made himself part of for our sake.

The sixth saying: "It is finished" (Jno. 19:30)

John's account gives us yet another detail of deep spiritual significance. When the man could not reach the mouth of Jesus with the sponge he put it on a branch of hyssop. We remember that it was with hyssop that the Israelites painted their door frames in Egypt with the blood at the time of the Passover. Hyssop was also used in the cleansing of the leper (Lev. 14:4). So how appropriate for hyssop to be there at that exact time as well! How wonderful are the ways and the foreknowledge of God! No aspect is overlooked.

Thus with his lips wetted came the great shout of triumph from Jesus, "It is finished". The word "finished" means 'completed', 'accomplished', 'consecrated'. The work was done and would

never have to be done again. He had taken away the sin of the world once and for all. He had finished the work God had given him to do.

Three years previously he had said: "I come to do Thy will, O God" (Heb. 10:9). Now it was all done. The three hours of darkness had given way to the light of realisation that God had not forsaken him. The light came back at the right time. Just as he had to go into the grave, so he would come out again, and God would invite him to His right hand.

What thoughts must have been going through his mind at this time! He had fulfilled all the Old Testament scriptures concerning himself, and the glory of immortality was waiting. The marvellous thing is that it is waiting for us as well because of what he did. As Jesus said in his parables, and will say when he returns: "Come, ye blessed of my Father . . . thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (Mt. 25:34,21). What room is there, however, for us to have personal pride in our lives when we think of what Jesus did?

The seventh saying: "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit" (Lk. 23:46)

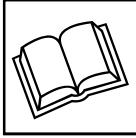
So to the very end, and the last saying of all: "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit". There, at the very end, we have a cry of complete and utter confidence. It was by the tree in the garden of Eden that man fell. It was by the tree on the hill of Calvary that man arose again. There are only eight words in that last saying, but eight in Scripture usually points to a new beginning. Here it is: "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit"; complete trust and contact restored again between Father and Son. This word "commend" has deep significance as well; it means 'to deposit', 'to lay alongside', and with these last words Jesus is saying that he is ready to be placed alongside his Father, secure in the knowledge that his life is now complete with God—God's will has been done.

This last saying of Jesus, like the first, and like them all, teaches the value of prayer in times of sorrow, stress and trouble. It is a wonderful consolation to have a loving heavenly Father, Whom we can now approach, and to Whom we can say, 'Abba, Father', because of Jesus and what he did on Calvary. So we have a lot to be thankful for. There is not much room for us to have things like pride or selfishness or pettiness in our lives, is there? What a perfect sacrifice Jesus was!

No wonder that an old brother, who is now dead, asleep waiting for Christ, once said the following words (they perhaps stretch the imagination a little, but they are worth thinking about): “Can you imagine what the ascension would be like, as Jesus entered into heaven after

his resurrection to meet his Father?—the outstretched hands of the Father welcoming the Son, the thunderous applause of the angelic host around the throne!”.

What a wonderful man the Lord Jesus Christ was!



Exposition

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The Exodus

A commentary on Exodus 1–15

B. The scene is set—Exodus 1 (Part 2)

Mark Vincent

In the previous issue it was pointed out in the introduction to Exodus 1 that it deals with three topics. The first two were covered in the [previous issue](#), and the third is below.

The format of the commentary

The narrative has been broken down into several **major sections**, of a chapter or two each; some of these will be covered in one month, others will take longer. An **Introduction** is provided for each of these major sections, which sets out the major events and themes dealt with in those chapters.

Each major section is broken into **sub-sections** or **episodes** (these are typically between five and twenty verses each). For each the **AV text** is followed by a **Comment**, which draws out the major lessons and items of interest from the text. The AV text also contains **Footnotes**, in which additional ‘one-off’ points are made for those wanting to work through Exodus more slowly.

The Hebrew midwives

1:15 And the king of Egypt spake to the Hebrew¹ midwives,² of which the name of the one was Shiprah, and the name of the other Puah:³

1:16 And he said, When ye do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, and see

them upon the stools;⁴ if it be a son, then ye shall kill him: but if it be a daughter, then she shall live.

1:17 But the midwives feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men children alive.

1:18 And the king of Egypt called for the midwives, and said unto them, Why have ye done this thing, and have saved the men children alive?

1:19 And the midwives said unto Pharaoh, Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are lively, and are delivered ere the midwives come in unto them.

1:20 Therefore God dealt well with the midwives: and the people multiplied, and waxed very mighty.⁵

1:21 And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that He made them houses.⁶

1:22 And Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river, and every daughter ye shall save alive.

Comment

Pharaoh, not content with the slave labour he has inflicted on the Israelites, is desperate for a