

SEVEN WORDS

Revealing the Mystery of the Cross

Hugh M Cartwright



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Publisher's Introduction

The cross of Calvary is a scene of awful solemnity and blackness. Yet when we listen to the words that Christ spoke from the cross, the deepening darkness does not exclude some clear, bright flashes of glorious grace. The sufferings to death of the Saviour did after all contribute to and culminate in his triumphant victory over sin and Satan. Indeed, they constitute the solid basis for the gospel message and all the faith and hope of the redeemed.

Christ spoke seven times from the cross. This book consists of seven sermons preached by Rev Hugh M Cartwright (1943–2011), one on each of the seven sayings. These sermons were preached as a series over the course of seven Lord's Day mornings in the spring of 2001. Mr Cartwright unfolds how the words of the Lord Jesus give us insights into what was happening at Calvary, highlighting Christ's purpose in going to the cross, his grace in action, and what his sufferings achieved on behalf of his people.

These sermons have been transcribed from audio recordings. They required only minimal editing in order to be suitable for reading.

Mr Cartwright points consistently to the graciousness of the Lord Jesus in coming, suffering and dying, and drawing sinners to himself. The preaching is fresh and vivid and brings the rays of gospel light to shine in our sin-darkened experience. These sermons are published in the expectation that the Spirit will bless the truths they display, so that readers will be encouraged to flee sin, embrace the Saviour, and live a life of devotion to God.

~ 1 ~

Father, forgive them

Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. — *Luke 23:34*

The cross of Christ is central in the gospel of the grace of God. It is central to the whole message of the Bible. At the same time it is the Bible that interprets the meaning of the cross of Christ. The cross is meaningless to many people, and many others interpret it in a way that fits in with their own notions. But we are dependent upon the Bible for understanding the meaning of the cross of Christ. If we are to have faith in Christ crucified, then it must be in Christ crucified as the significance of that is set before us in the Word of God.

The whole Bible interprets the cross, although there are certain parts of it that do so in a very particular manner. There was a certain silence surrounding Christ on the cross of Calvary, but that silence was broken on seven occasions. The words that Jesus spoke on these occasions give us some insight into the meaning of what he was suffering. They give us some insight into his own state of mind, but more than that, they give us insight into what was happening on the cross.

That is true concerning this saying of Christ, just after he was crucified. 'Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

I. The perfection of Christ as a person and as a Saviour

We notice, first of all, that these words bring before us the perfection of Christ, both as a person and as a Saviour.

Here he is, and he is being put to death by wicked men, and he is being subjected to the curse of God against him on account of the sins of his people which he is bearing. Yet there is no resentment, there is no heaping of reproach upon those who are reproaching him. Although he is himself being insulted, and under attack, yet he responds in the way in which he had exhorted his disciples to respond in such situations. He responds as one who is living out and practising perfectly what he taught to others.

When we look at the cross of Calvary, and we see Christ reacting as he does to the situation in which he is found, we are seeing something of the perfection of his character. 'He is led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before the shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.' What we are seeing on Calvary is one who is himself perfectly conformed to the holiness of God. The holiness of God is shining through him.

We are seeing there one who is devoted perfectly to his Father and to his Father's will. It is his Father who has brought him to this place. Yet you can see the love and the harmony between him and his Father, and his submissiveness to his Father, in these words, 'Father, forgive them.' He is conscious of his heart going out in love to the Father, he's conscious of being in perfect harmony with the will of the Father, being submissive to the will of the Father, even though that will is subjecting him to the most fearful sufferings at this time.

Also we see his perfect love to sinners. 'Having loved his own that were in the world, he loved them to the end.' He loved them, to the very point of dying for them. Even although they were involved in putting him to death, yet he continues to love them

and to pray for them, to intercede on their behalf. 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends,' but what kind of friends did Christ have? Every one of them by nature hated God, and every one of them by nature therefore hated Christ, God manifest in the flesh. Every one of them by nature was crucifying the Lord of glory. But yet he loved them. And he manifests his love to them in praying for them when they are in the very act of putting him to death on Calvary.

So here is a perfect person. Even on the cross under all these pressures, there's no fault in him. He reacts in a perfect manner. He is motivated by his devotion to the Father, by his love to his people. These words reveal him as a perfect person, a perfect man, and a perfect Saviour, the Lamb of God. Whatever else is involved in that expression, 'the Lamb of God,' there is certainly involved the perfect innocence, the positive holiness of the Lord Jesus, and his wholehearted, loving submissiveness to the will of his Father.

2. Ignorance does not make forgiveness either unnecessary or impossible

The second thing we want to notice is that ignorant sinning does not render forgiveness unnecessary, or impossible. The fact that a person sins ignorantly doesn't mean that he does not need to be forgiven. And it does not mean that there is no forgiveness for him. We have Christ praying, 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do.' Ignorant sinners need forgiveness, and there is forgiveness for ignorant sinners.

The people for whom Christ prayed were people who needed forgiveness. He prayed, 'Father, forgive them.'

What is forgiveness? Well, forgiveness is the removal of the guilt of sin. It's called 'the remission of sins' in places. It's the removal of liability to the wrath of God due to people for their sins.

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It's putting sin away, sending sin away from a person. So obviously, those for whom he is praying, and for whom he is asking forgiveness, needed to have sin put away. They were sinners. They were exposed by their sin to the wrath and to the curse of God.

We have to notice that these people were ignorant sinners. They needed forgiveness although they were ignorant sinners. They did not know what they were doing when they put to death the Lord of glory. They did not know who he was. They did not know what they were doing. Their ignorance was a complete ignorance.

They should have known. God was manifest in the flesh. If they had eyes to see, Christ was very obviously manifesting divine power and divine qualities. He was God. He was perfect. They couldn't find any fault in him. They tried their best. Everyone who was involved in the matter tried to find something that was wrong with Christ, and they couldn't find anything. They had many evidences of the perfection of his character. They had many evidences of his gracious attitude, his gracious power. Yet such was the darkness and ignorance of sin that was in them, that they did not know what they were doing when they crucified the Lord of glory. That is stated very clearly in the words of Christ, 'They know not what they do.'

Peter brought that home to them on the day of Pentecost. There were thousands of people there, and many of them had been here, amongst the people who were jeering at Christ. Peter said, 'You took him, and with your wicked hands you crucified him and you slew him.' 'Through ignorance you did it, through ignorance your rulers did it. But you are still the murderers of the Lord of glory. And you are still exposed on account of that to the wrath and to the curse of God. The fact that you were ignorant of what you were doing is not an excuse for what you were doing — especially when