

## CHRIST'S LAMENTATION ON THE CROSS OF GOLGOTHA

*“And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice: Eli, Eli, lama sabach-thani? that is, My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken Me?”*

(Matthew 27: 46)

When we follow the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ, we notice how He more and more became isolated from his friends on earth. But throughout this time He retained the favour of God, the presence of His Father, the grace of the Holy Spirit. He could always count on God's faithfulness.

Throughout His life and also in His final day Christ put His trust fully in God. He did this, even though He knew that in the end He would lose God's favour. The very thought of losing God's communion already pressed out of Him drops of bloody sweat in Gethsemane. He knew it was coming, and begged: let this cup pass from Me. But the cup could not pass, and now, on the cross, the time came to drink it to the last bitter drop.

And we must realize that the anticipation of this suffering was nothing compared to the suffering itself. To know something is one thing; to undergo it is quite another.

We confess that we cannot understand Christ's suffering. For we do not know what *hell* is. We cannot begin to comprehend what is like to be cast into utter darkness although being righteous and holy.

This text gives us the climax of Christ's suffering, or maybe I should say, the deepest point. Here He testifies that He has undergone the second death – the anguish of hell – before He enters into the first death, the realm of the dead. When He has survived hell, He gives Himself to physical death. Do you know that with all others who are judged by God it is the other way around: first death, then hell? But here it is: first hell, then death.

We would not have known this if Christ had not made it known in the words contained in this passage. For this text gives us insight into the great struggle which He had on the cross. The text is, in fact, a complaint, but not one made in sinful anger. It is an appeal, but not one issued in rebellious rage. It is a lamentation, originating not in bitterness but in deep anguish of soul. It is a lamentation which asks the great question, *Why?* and provides the only answer to that question: *Why? Because! Because of our transgression!* This is how we may look at the Gospel concerning Christ's lamentation on the cross of Golgotha. It reveals the depth of His personal suffering and the truth of His messianic ministry.

## **NOT ORIGINAL**

The main words of this passage are, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Now we know that these words of Christ are not original; He was not the first to use them. It is a quotation from Psalm 22, spoken first by David. For this reason some Judaist scholars have suggested that this passage cannot be true, for what crucified and dying person would go around quoting Bible verses?

But that is a false suggestion. For is it not true that many believers in the last phase of their earthly life and even on their deathbed refer to specific passages of Scripture and quote texts of comfort? And would not our Lord Jesus, whose entire life was built on Scripture, in His last hours have comforted and strengthened

Himself with the Word of God, indeed with the Word that spoke so eminently of Himself and His great suffering? Where else could Christ turn except to the Bible? That's how He started in the desert, saying to Satan: it is written! And that's how He ends on Golgotha, saying: it is written!

The words of Psalm 22 were first spoken by David under very different circumstances, and from a very different background. But here in Christ's mouth they gain an unprecedented depth and meaning. Now we begin to see what these words mean prophetically.

## **THE SPECIFIC TIMING**

Please note carefully how Matthew tells us that Jesus did not speak these words at the beginning of His suffering on the cross but towards the end. It says, "And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice. . . ." And that ninth hour is significant for a number of reasons. First, it is the time when the period of darkness comes to an end. Second it is the time when the evening sacrifice is brought into the temple. Matthew is not going to argue about a few minutes more or less, for he writes "about the ninth hour. . . ." around that time. But it is clear that a strong connection is made. After three hours of suffering in the dark, Christ – who has not spoken throughout that time – now suddenly with a loud voice says these words, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

This tells us what this suffering in darkness was all about. These words are the result of an intense struggle, an expression of deep anguish, a bitter and loud crying of the soul. Here speaks a man broken to the very core of His existence. After three long and endless hours, finally He speaks, and He speaks these words.

## **THE DARKNESS**

Let us first note something about this darkness. We do not now have to deal with the question whether this day-time darkness was caused by a solar eclipse or the descending of a dark smog (called a "black sirocco"). Let's just call it an exceptional and significant phenomenon. At noon, at midday, the sun turns black and everything is steeped in total darkness.

What is clear is that this kind of darkness is symbolic of God's ultimate punishment, and that it always culminates in death. The Lord Jesus once Himself referred to hell as being a place of "utter" or "outer darkness." It is a darkness so impregnable that there is no light whatsoever. And no light means: no way out, no hope! Psalm 97 speaks of the "joy and light that will dawn for the upright," but this does not apply for Christ: light and joy are removed from Him, and He is totally isolated from contact with those around Him.

Many people – young and old, but especially the very young – are afraid of the dark. Children say: mommy, leave the hall light on. Don't close the bedroom door, daddy! There has to be a way out, a light that offers comfort. Sometimes people who are sick, at home or in the hospital, tell me: the nights are the worst, so dark and quiet,

then I feel so alone. Indeed, how the soul is lifted when the sun comes up in the morning over the shimmering hill.

## **UTTERLY FORSAKEN**

Now the text does not say it, but many explainers conclude that when this pitch-black darkness descended over the land and covered the hill of Golgotha, everyone became very quiet. Even the scoffers stopped mocking. People perhaps reached out to each other and held on for comfort. Soldiers stood side by side, grim-faced, weapons poised. Women huddled together, whispering fearfully. And Christ? Well, Christ had only one direction left to go: to God! He Who had lain at the bosom of the Father now reached out to heaven, and found that instead He was plunged into hell. The last door, the only door of real significance, was closed to Him!

And this is His great struggle on the cross. Finally, after three hours of anxiety and anguish, He confesses, yes, laments loudly, that God forsook Him. My God, He says, He in whom I've trusted, whom I have always served, has forsaken Me. And the text indicates: He has been utterly and completely forsaken.

Christ confesses this reality with a loud voice. The Jews had mocked Him saying, "He trusts in God, let God deliver Him now, for He said I am the Son of God." But when our Lord turned to God, there was no help, no support, no fellowship. God did not deliver Him or surround Him with love and kindness. He was left utterly alone.

## **THE AGONY OF HELL**

This means that during these hours Christ was plunged into the agony of hell. For hell is the place where God's love and mercy are not apparent, where only the fullness of His wrath is evident. God is in hell only with His sovereign and righteous condemnation.

When the Lord Jesus takes up that question of David, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" He reveals to us something of the great struggle which He had on the cross during that time. Forsaken. It's a fact. It's true. The Jews were never more right: cast out as a criminal. But why? Why Me, Oh God? David asked that question too, remember? But David was never utterly forsaken! And David was a sinful person. David had brought about his own fate. Still David asked: why hast Thou forsaken me? Will the great Son of David not ask it all the more? For He did not bring it upon Himself by His sins; it came over Him from God's side. And therefore the question was wrenched out of Him, after three long hours of intensive, fruitless searching: Why Me?

We must understand that it was not a rhetorical question, but a very existential one, a question with deep personal involvement. It revealed a real *struggle*, a going on a route with many temptations. Do not forget that Christ was completely human! So He struggled with the "why" and the "wherefore." He did not just ask the question for the sake of interest as if the answer was a simple: well, you see, I

had to forsake you in order to save the church, don't make a problem out of it, we've discussed this before, you know why. Don't ask silly questions.

No, this lamentation reveals the depth of His personal suffering. He really asks about the why. He may know it, but when He experiences it, the question does rise. Our Lord, though perfect, was subject to questions, probing questions, and He had to grow in the struggle to find an answer. Do you think the answer comes easy, even if you know the answer? This is a very real question for the Lord, otherwise Golgotha would have been a sham. Why Me? Of all people, why did you decide to forsake Me? For I am innocent! This is the unspoken claim in the question. I am your faithful Servant. Christ's sense of justice functioned on the cross: He knew that He was innocent.

## **A BROKEN HEART**

And so the Lord Jesus, from out of hell, searched the heavens, but found no response. He hit a wall of silence and was crushed under waves of despair and anguish. It devastated Him, not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually. It broke His heart. And finally it had to come out. After those three hours of intense torment, He shouted it out – not in rebellion but in deep agony – “My God, My God” – twice because He was so shattered – “Why hast Thou forsaken Me”? Why have you left me so utterly alone? For this is hell; I cannot live without you, I do not want to live without you, I love you. Without My God I am indeed totally lost! He asked, but did not receive, He sought, but did not find, He knocked and it was not opened unto Him.

Christ really struggled as a true human being with this great question. He had to find answers, to give them to Himself and so to His church. He was not a machine, but fully human, and so He searched on Golgotha in the darkness, not doubting the Word of God, but growing and maturing in His suffering to this point of lamentation. It was not an accusation, nor a rebellion, and neither was it a being severed from His God! Someone once wrote beautifully: Christ was rejected by God, forsaken by Him, but Christ was never *separated* from God, He never separated Himself from God, for it still was: My God, My God!

## **WHY ME?**

Why me? We, too, sometimes ask this question, although we can never ask it as Christ did. We sometimes know the answer too, but it is never easy to go through the questions and answers personally, to experience the lamentation, to come to rest in the answers which God provides.

As the Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper says it so well, Christ on the cross here “humbled Himself to the very deepest shame and anguish of hell. Then He called out with a loud voice: My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”

We will never understand the depth of Christ's suffering, for to do that we would have to be perfect and in hell at the same time, and this cannot happen to us. But we

must see *something* of what He experienced, we must have an inkling of the depth of His personal suffering, so that we may realize the truth of His messianic ministry.

## **NOT LETTING GO**

“Why hast Thou forsaken Me?” Those who stood around the cross, as the light began to break through again, saw here another cause to scoff. He said “Eli, Eli,” clearly Aramaic for “My God, My God,” but they joked around and said: ah, now He is calling for Elijah. Yes, God has forsaken Him, obviously, and let’s see if Elijah will help. Elijah, you may know, was seen as the forerunner of the Messiah. What mockery: does the Messiah need the help of His forerunner?

No, the misunderstanding is deliberate and the joke is cruel. Christ does not need anyone’s help. He admits and confesses that He has been totally forsaken of God, even though He had once claimed “I and the Father are one.” But He also maintains: I am innocent of all crime before God and men.

Why Me? Not because I am guilty, for I am not guilty. Well, then it must have another reason. It is because I bear the sins of my people, the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race, that is why!

What is so beautiful here is that Christ did not let go of His Father, His God in heaven. Even when He was plunged into the agony of hell, He did not abandon His claim: I am not guilty of the things ascribed to Me. I am the true Son of God. I am a true and righteous man. God may cut the bond between Him and His Son, but Christ from His side will not let go. His lamentation is indeed a tremendous appeal to God in heaven.

He did not, in anger and reviling, break the bond with God. That’s what some criminals do: they revile and curse at their just judgment. As they are being led away to the execution they scream: damn you all! They raise their defiant chin in anger and set their mouth against God.

And Christ could have become extremely bitter, for He was innocent of all the crimes ascribed to Him, falsely accused and unjustly condemned. He could have cursed God in heaven, and so died in self-vindication. But He did not.

## **A DECLARATION OF LOVE**

We see here the truth of His messianic ministry emerging. The words, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsake Me?” are a declaration of *love*, a sincere reaching out in truth. He did not break the bond with God, even though God broke the bond with Him. From the darkness of hell Christ looked up into heaven, and He kept knocking at the door: my God, my God! He maintained His innocence and confessed His love even in the hellish agony of the cross. Someone has written that with these words, “My God, My God,” a hand reached up out of hell to take hold of the throne of heaven, and for the first time this hand was not soiled but pure!

And so the question already has an answer. Why Me? Because I am the Lamb of God, called to remove the sins of the world. Why Me? Because I bear in my flesh the burden of sin. Because I carry on my head the curse of God, His just

curse, His righteous wrath! Why Me? Because this is the truth, the deep truth of my messianic ministry: to give my life, to undergo eternal and temporal death for my people. In these words, Christ, maintaining His innocence, reveals that He is indeed the true Messiah of His people. His forsakenness is *messianic*, His agony is that of a sacrificial lamb slain for others.

## MESSIANIC DIMENSION

This does not diminish His personal suffering. But it does give to that suffering a messianic dimension, which we today must fully comprehend. The Lord's Supper Form puts it beautifully when it says: He [Christ] was forsaken by God that we might nevermore be forsaken by Him!

Why hast Thou forsaken Me? God's answer is: so that I can always be a Father to my children. So that the curse which rests on them may be taken away by you, and you may fill them with your blessing!

Christ's struggle was not one in which He doubted His messianic work. That is the false premise, the satanic premise of the movie "The Last Temptation of Christ." Yes, He suffered deeply, intensely, personally, more than we will ever understand, and in that suffering many temptations came His way, but He did know throughout the entire ordeal: I suffer as a lamb, I suffer for my people, so that they will never have to undergo what I am now undergoing for them!

## NEVERMORE FORSAKEN

The first thing which He said after those awful hours of darkness was: I have been utterly forsaken – an agony beyond description – for your sake, so that you will nevermore be forsaken of God! For this is the truth of my messianic ministry: that I have earned for you on the cross *eternal fellowship with God!*

And so the day of Christ's death is indeed for us *Good Friday*. It is Gospel, the glad tidings of His lamentation. His lamentation becomes our jubilation. Nevermore forsaken. My God, My God, why hast Thou *not* forsaken me? For I have deserved it. I have so often let go of you, rejected you, forsaken you. I have so often been so angry when I was tried and tested. I have set my mouth against God, instead of appealing to His covenant love and mercy.

Why hast Thou not forsaken me? Because I once, says the Lord, I once forsook Him on the cross of Golgotha. Once is enough. That was totally devastating, and it is enough.

So now I can go on again, knowing that the Father in heaven will never forsake me. Not in any of the trials and temptations of life. Also not in the dreadful hour of my own death, when my life comes before me with all its sins and shortcomings. And not on the day of judgment, when I must stand before the judgement seat of God. He will not forsake me for Christ's sake!

We have to believe this with our whole heart. If we don't, or act as if we don't, we deny the very core of Golgotha, we scoff also at these words of Christ. But

when we do believe this, we will experience it throughout our life. When we look back, we discover it, and when we look ahead we know it: God has not forsaken and will never forsake us, even though we often forsook Him and accused Him in our mind.

Sometimes we can feel so lost and forsaken, even of God. There is a well-known poem about footprints in the sand, two sets of foot prints, those of a father walking with his child on the beach. At a certain point there is only one set of footprints. And later as the child looks back, he says: father, why did you leave me for a while, for I see only one set of prints. The father says: those are my footprints, and I didn't leave you. I was carrying you, for you couldn't walk anymore. Sometimes we think He's gone, but instead He is carrying us through the difficulties, oftener even than we imagine!

There is a sad song that the world sings: you've got to walk that lonesome valley, you've got to walk it by yourself. It's a lie. Only Christ had to walk by Himself through the agony of hell and through the valley of the shadow of death. Only Christ was all alone. Utterly forsaken. So that we never have to walk alone.

Now we may always reach up from earth into heaven and take hold of the foot of the throne with hands washed in His blood, and the Father up above is looking down with love. Now we do not have to ask the question: why must I suffer so? For we have the answer to the question: why did *He* suffer so? Now life becomes livable and enjoyable, meaningful and purposeful, now we can still our restless heart, our disquieted soul, and say to ourselves and to each other: Hope in God, your faith retrieving, He will still your refuge be! (Psalm 42: 7, *Book of Praise*). Now we can pray, with the certainty of being heard: forsake me not, for I on Thee rely. Now we can confess, the LORD is faithful, why then be afraid?

Never afraid anymore. Not of the dark. Not of the agony of hell. Not even of the presence of death. Not of the day of judgment. Never afraid, for My God, my God has never forsaken and will never forsake me! They may say with proud defiance: where is God, your firm reliance? And I say: My God? Don't worry about Him, for He is My God and Saviour. The lamentation of Christ has become the jubilation of the church.