

THE SEVEN LAST WORDS ON THE CROSS

by Richard Wurmbrand

Introduction

While hanging on the cross, Jesus uttered seven sayings, commonly referred to as “the seven last words on the cross”:

“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

“Verily I say to you, today you shall be with Me in paradise.”

“Woman, behold your son! . . . Behold your mother!”

“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?—My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

“I thirst!”

“It is finished!”

“Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit.”

A person who anticipates being crucified does not prepare a speech for the occasion. Even less so Jesus, who had advised His disciples: “But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what you shall speak, for it shall be given you in that same hour what you shall speak. For it is not you that speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.” (Matt. 10:19, 20)

The seven last words on the cross are heavenly words. Earlier, Jesus had said, “But as My Father has taught Me, I speak these things.” (John 8:28) Even while suffering on the cross, Jesus spoke what had been revealed to Him by His Father.

So let us spend an hour at the foot of the cross listening to the precious words and trying to understand their meaning. Perhaps they will reveal God to us more than Jesus’ longer speeches, which involved some preparation, whereas the words on the cross were spontaneous expressions of His divine being.

‘FATHER, FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO!’

Earlier in His ministry Jesus had advised His hearers, “Learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart.” Furthermore, He assured them, “My burden is light.” (Matt. 11:29)

Now, on the cross, it becomes apparent that the one who is patient and meek in heart, who does good without expecting good in return, often suffers the most painful torments. And in truth, the first words spoken by the crucified Jesus are a prayer of forgiveness for those who have treated Him in an unjust manner.

There is no nobler man than the one who becomes his enemies’ defender. On the cross, this is what Jesus was: the defender, the go-between, the mediator between the Father and those who crucified Him.

If only we could learn from Him that our first thought when trouble comes should be to pray for those who are responsible!

From beginning to end, throughout His hours of torment, Jesus was ready to offer forgiveness to His abusers. Until the last moment, He did not say even one word against those who clamored for His death without a reason. He did not curse them, but He prayed for them, in this way fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah hundreds of years before: “He interceded for the guilty.” (Isa. 53:12)

Love conquers all. Love conquers even the terrible torment. It conquers the harsh but just law of God, which does not forgive murderers.

Centuries before, the Lord said to Noah’s family: “And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man. At the hand of every man’s brother will I require the life of man.” (Gen. 9:5) But Jesus places Himself between the law and the murderers. He prays that the law will not strike them. He is the go-between for the guilty.

In the faith chapter of Hebrews is found the name of Samson, whose last prayer was, “O Lord God, remember me, I pray, and strengthen me, I pray, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.” (Judges 16:28)

Another model of faith is Jeremiah, who says in a prayer about his enemies: “Shall evil be recompensed for good? for they have dug a pit for my soul. Remember that I stood before You to speak good for them, and to turn away their wrath from them. Therefore deliver up their children to the famine, and pour out their blood by the force of

the sword; and let their wives be bereaved of their children, and be widows; and let their men be put to death; let their young men be slain by the sword in battle. Let a cry be heard from their houses, when You shall bring a troop suddenly upon them: for they have dug a pit to take me, and hid snares for my feet. Yet, Lord, You know all their counsel against me to slay me: forgive not their iniquity, neither blot out their sin from Your sight, but let them be overthrown before You; deal thus with them in the time of Your anger.” (Jer. 18:20-23)

But if they were models of faith worthy of being part of Holy Scripture, along with their prayers that arose out of a justified rebellion over mockery of God, what are we to say about the words, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”? We can only bow in silence and adoration.

Samson’s judgment was just, as was Jeremiah’s. But in Jesus mercy defeated judgment. The sin of murderers, of course, cannot go unpunished. But Jesus carried their punishment. He died for the guilty and asked forgiveness for His own murderers. If they can be forgiven, whose sins are too great to receive His forgiveness? You can come to Him with complete confidence.

What a powerful impression these words must have made on the people gathered on Golgotha! Crucifixion was a common form of execution in Roman times. Those who were watching Jesus must have seen many such executions, but a prayer like this from the mouth of a crucified man they had never heard.

Two thousand years later, these words still make a profound impression. Let’s try to understand them better.

Sins of ignorance are still sins, and forgiveness is necessary.

If Jesus’ murderers did not know what they were doing, they still needed forgiveness, and that is why He prayed for them.

If you do not know that something is against the law, that does not mean you are innocent. Ignorance and innocence are not the same thing. Ignorance, of course, reduces the blame. Jesus Himself implied this in His prayer of forgiveness. But ignorance does not erase guilt.

On the day of judgment we will have to answer to things we were not aware of. Our ignorance will be a point of accusation as well.

The Jews who sought to kill Jesus should have observed the signs He had given them. They should have searched the prophecies in order to make sure they were fulfilled in Jesus. If they failed to do this and chose to remain in ignorance, they were guilty.

The Roman officers and soldiers obeyed the command of their superiors. Not to do so would have meant their death sentence. But they also needed God's forgiveness for their actions. Jesus' murder was considered a sin for them, though they might have claimed ignorance. However, they should have spent their free time searching the holy books, which were available in Israel at that time. Then they could have found out that Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior. And they might have chosen to be sentenced to death themselves rather than kill an innocent Man.

So every person who took part in His killing was guilty. But in His compassion Jesus turned their guilt into an excuse. They were guilty of not knowing. He prayed for their forgiveness precisely because they did not know what they were doing.

For whom did Jesus pray?

Jesus prayed for all those guilty of His murder. Many days after the crucifixion, Peter, speaking to the people of Jerusalem, conceded, "I realize that through ignorance you did it, as did also your rulers." (Acts 3:17)

That is why Paul writes, "We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom which none of the rulers of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." (I Cor. 2:7, 8)

Moreover, Paul believed that he himself was included in this prayer of the Savior. Even though he had been among the murderers of the first Christian martyrs, even though he had been a mocker and a persecutor, he obtained mercy, because he had been working ignorantly in disbelief. (I Tim. 1:13)

Isn't it true for every sinner, to some extent, that he does not know when he is sinning? Who among us would sin if we could know in advance what discomfort it would bring to our souls when we go astray? Are we aware of how God views sin? Do we see

beforehand all the evil we will do to others through our sins? Do we know how much our wrongdoings torment the fatherly heart of our God?

Probably not. Therefore, God, who overlooks the times of ignorance (Acts 17:30), receives for all of us the prayer of Jesus: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!”

Still there are souls who refuse to be comforted. They say, “When I sinned, I knew what I was doing. My sin was willful. Therefore, I cannot be forgiven.”

Let anyone who thinks this way consider that if Jesus on the cross prayed for those who did not know what they were doing, forgiveness includes everyone. In his first epistle, John writes, “The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from *all* sin.” (I John 17)

The thief on the cross who repented and to whom Jesus promised paradise had known what he was doing. He himself admitted that he deserved to die. Still, he was forgiven.

Through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross forgiveness is extended to everyone, whether their sins were committed willfully or in ignorance. Three times the Bible repeats the assurance, “*Whoever* shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21; Romans 10:13)

All sinners can obtain God’s forgiveness: this is the good news of the gospel. Jesus prays to the Father for their salvation with the words, “Father, forgive them.” And the just Father, who cannot leave sin unpunished, forgives them, because Jesus’ blood of the new covenant was shed for many for the forgiveness of sin. (Matt. 26:28)

If Jesus’ words were, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” His hands and feet, nailed to the cross, spoke a different language: “Father, forgive them, for I am giving My blood to atone for their sins.” With this prayer, Jesus begins His work as high priest and intercessor between God and all people.

In His last prayer before being separated from the disciples, Jesus said, “I pray for them [the disciples]; I do not pray for the world, but for those You have given Me.” (John 17:9) But on the cross, He broadened His scope. From then on, He would pray and intercede for all—in truth, for all sinners.

His love surpasses every human imagination. He not only prays for His murderers but, even more, tries hard to get them to receive this forgiveness. That is why He says out loud, for them to hear, “Father, forgive them.”

What was the need for such a prayer? Why ask the Father for forgiveness? “The Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins.” (Matt. 9:6) Jesus Himself had the power to forgive; He did not need to ask the Father for it.

But because His murderers despised and rejected Him, scorning His forgiveness and not wanting to accept it, Jesus offered them the Father’s salvation, in which they professed to believe.

It’s like a person who wants to help a poor family without giving offense and so uses an intermediary to fill the need. Jesus too is eager for His enemies and murderers to be forgiven, but knowing they do not believe in Him He prays for His Father to forgive them. Jesus came to glorify His Father and was quite willing to defer to Him in offering forgiveness.

Are we all forgiven?

When Jesus prayed to His Father with others present, He always considered what might be useful to those listening to Him. In one of His prayers He even explained, “But because of the people who stand by I said it.” (John 11:42)

On the cross Jesus uttered His prayer of forgiveness so that we might learn how to pray for forgiveness for our sins and the sins of others against us.

St. Augustine, one of the great teachers of the Church, explains, “The Grace prayed so that the sinner may pray. The Doctor prayed so that the patient may pray. The read-to-forgive Judge prayed so that the guilty may ask for forgiveness.”

Anyone can be forgiven if he asks the heavenly Father for forgiveness on the grounds of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, but only if he joins his own prayer with the forgiveness prayer of the Savior for him. The soul that does so can be sure that such a prayer will be heard and that God’s judgment is cast aside for such a prayer.

When Jesus was on the cross, darkness fell upon Him and on the countryside. Soon an earthquake was to follow. Jesus knew what was about to befall mankind because

of His crucifixion. He saw in the darkness and the earthquake signs of God's judgment similar to what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, and through His prayer He aborted the wrath of God. In that convulsion He became a lightning rod for us. God's wrath struck Him, and we the guilty were saved—all because He prayed.

Jesus' first prayer was not for His mother or His disciples but for His enemies. Love prays, first of all, for the most sinful.

There is forgiveness from God for even the worst sinner.

The people who crucified Jesus were committing the greatest crime on earth: a murder like no other, past or future. Their hands were stained with the blood of the Son of God as they nailed Him to the cross. Yet Jesus prayed for their forgiveness.

The soul burdened with sin but conscious of being loved by another is tempted to think, "This person loves me only because he does not know my sin." But nothing is hidden from Jesus. If He could pray for the forgiveness of His murderers, He can pray as well for our forgiveness.

As a result, many of His murderers actually found forgiveness. When the centurion who guarded the cross saw what had happened, he praised the Lord and said, "Certainly, this man was innocent." (Luke 23:47) And the soldiers who were with him keeping watch over Jesus feared greatly and said, "Truly, this was the Son of God." (Matt. 27:54) Soon after Pentecost a great many priests also came to faith. (Acts 6:7)

If these obtained forgiveness, then it is certain that any man, no matter how sinful, can obtain remission for his sins. Can you doubt that Jesus' blood is sufficient for yours as well?

When the king of the ancient city of Nineveh heard of the preaching of the prophet Jonah, he responded with sackcloth and ashes, along with all the inhabitants, and said, "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?" (Jonah 3:9)

In response, the inhabitants of Nineveh turned from their wicked ways in the simple hope that they would be forgiven, although they might not have been sure they would be received by the Lord.

With the certainty of the cross behind us, can we be less hopeful than the wicked inhabitants of Nineveh?

We must also forgive.

If we do not forgive people their trespasses, the Father will not forgive our trespasses. This is what Jesus taught in His Sermon on the Mount. (Matt. 6:15) Jesus also said, “Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matt. 5:23, 24)

The lesson for us is that we should forgive one another right now. After all, we have so little to forgive. How great is the evil done to us? A bad word, a false accusation, a misunderstanding, a wrong deed. How insignificant when compared to what the Savior had to forgive. In His parable of the unforgiving servant, the master exclaims, “I forgave you all that debt!” (Matt. 18:32) Can we not forgive the small debts of our acquaintances?

That is why Paul wrote, “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you.” (Eph. 4:31, 32)

Let us not excuse ourselves by saying this is something only Jesus could do, because He was the Son of God. For two thousand years we have had the witness of countless believers who followed His example in everything. Let us remember Stephen, who cried out while his enemies were stoning him to death, “Lord, don’t charge them with this sin!” (Acts 7:60)

Bishop Hannington of Uganda, while being led to his death by the heathen, whispered to himself so that he would think no evil thought, “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.” (Matt. 5:44) After his death this martyr was rewarded by God. His son, who also became a preacher of the gospel in the same country, following in his father’s footsteps, had the joy of bringing to faith and baptizing his father’s murderers.

God's grace is sufficient for all—including you.

“VERILY I SAY TO YOU, TODAY YOU SHALL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE.”

Jesus was arrested on the night of Thursday to Friday. He was crucified at nine on Friday morning. (Mark 15:25) From His arrest to His crucifixion there may have been a period of about ten hours or more—a long night. And the Gospels don't tell everything that happened to Him during all those hours.

But it is possible that between one judgment and the next He might have been kept in jail. And since He was destined to die from the beginning, of course He would have been put in a cell with others sentenced to death.

One can imagine what might have taken place. Perhaps there were three thieves awaiting sentence in that cell. On Friday they too were going to be crucified.

What a terrible thing for a man to know that on the morrow he will be nailed to a cross! The mind can scarcely comprehend the torment that the body will endure. And after the hours and often days of pain—what? Nothingness? Judgment? The whole being shudders at the thought.

In such a cell on such a night one would feel surrounded by the ghosts of those who had been there before. But what would a thief do? Pray? To whom? Confess? Who would believe the repentance of such a man? It would be easy to go mad, to curse, to cry out in despair.

Thieves have mothers and often love them. The thoughts of a thief might have turned to a precious, loving mother, to a forsaken wife, to children left behind.

But what added to the grief of two thieves was that Barabbas, jailed together with them (Mark 15:7), had betrayed them, something not done even among thieves. This man had arranged, either through bribes or through pleas to the high priest, to be pardoned the next day—whereas those who had followed him were left to go through a painful death until the end.

Angry and betrayed, they might have knocked strongly on the cell door. But who would have cared about them? No one can be expected to have mercy on or share the

pain of a hopeless thief. Even good people steel their hearts against the accused (as if they were pure!) and dismiss the guilty with a shrug: “He did wrong, so he must die.”

Who would wipe the tears from the eyes of a helpless thief? Who would comfort him?

One can imagine the cell door opening suddenly and another Man being thrust inside, His face covered with blood. The soldiers would slam shut the heavy cell door and go away laughing. Now in the cell there aren't three but four men sentenced to death. This shows that wherever three people are hurting, there are, in fact, four, because Jesus always suffers with those who suffer.

The heathen King Nebuchadnezzar threw into the fire three faithful young men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, for not bowing down to an idol. But when the king looked into the oven, his face paled and he said to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said to the king, True, O king. He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.” (Dan. 3:24, 25)

The fourth Man, who looked like the Son of God, like Jesus, can be seen by a faithful person next to any sufferer.

Barabbas was also tormented and restless. Jesus was in the cell on death row next to three hopeless thieves.

In any prison, when a new inmate is thrown into a cell with other people, he is immediately asked, “Who are you? What are you in here for?” The three thieves must have asked Jesus, “Why are you sentenced to death?”

How long He had been waiting for this question, and how much He wanted to answer them!

During the centuries of persecution, convicted Christians always tried to gain for God's kingdom the souls of those who were with them in prison. Jesus may have set them an example in this matter.

This is only a possible scenario, not detailed in Scripture. But it is not difficult to imagine how the conversation might have gone.

Paul said he became all things to all men in order to bring them to salvation. (I Cor. 9:22) No doubt Jesus tailored His approach to His audience. Perhaps He answered

the thieves in these words: “You have asked Me who I am. I am the Savior of the world, the Messiah, the One foretold by the prophets. You have asked Me why I am in jail. For robbery, because I came into this world to rob the house of the strong, that is, of the devil. (Matt. 12:919) In order to tie up the devil forever, in order to rob him of the souls who rightfully belong to God and whom he had enslaved, I must pay the ransom price, My life. You have asked Me if I am sentenced to death. ‘This is why I came into this world, to give My life for the forgiveness of the sins of the many.’”

It would not be surprising if at first the thieves did not fully understand Jesus’ words. They might have thought Him crazy.

At one point His own family thought He was out of His mind. Nevertheless, the thieves might have helped Him wash His wounds; they might have given Him something to eat. But still He would keep talking about the kingdom and salvation.

No doubt the thieves at this point would interrupt Him with mocking words that any Christian might hear today: “So what if I believe I get off? If you say that God is all-powerful, let Him do something to get us out of this prison. If You are the Savior of the world, can’t You set us free?”

Jesus would have explained, patiently, that His kingdom was not like that. In this world He Himself was a martyr. In the future, His church throughout the centuries would be persecuted. He must have made it clear that salvation lay in the forgiveness of sins. He must have told them many other things.

In this way, the hour of crucifixion drew nearer imperceptibly.

The thieves, of course, would have understood little of what He said, Perhaps they felt like hitting their heads against the wall in hopelessness. But Jesus would have knelt in prayer of intercession for His cell mates.

Finally the cell door opened and the prisoners, with the exception of Barabbas, who was set free, were led out by the guards, saddled with their crosses, and taken on the long road to Golgotha. But even in His pain and weakness, Jesus talked to sympathetic women about the judgment to come. (Luke 23:27-31) Might He not also have talked to the thieves with Him, advising them again to repent?

Jesus is crucified between thieves.

Now all three condemned men are crucified. This was the punishment of choice by the heathen Roman society of that day. Instead of trying to surround the criminal with special love, seeing how dark and unhappy his soul was, they meted out a cruel, lingering punishment.

How does society justify the execution of thieves when it too is guilty of such crimes?

It is said that the great emperor Alexander the Great once asked a pirate who was brought before him for trial, "What gives you the right to rob ships at sea?" The pirate bravely answered the emperor, who had conquered many countries through war, "The same authority that gives you the right to rob the world. I am a pirate, and from time to time I rob one small ship, but you rob entire countries! And still, the world calls me 'thief' and you 'emperor'!" (From the book of stories of the priest Joseph Trifa.)

But this is the way it has always been.

And now the two thieves were crucified, with Jesus between them. Naked and in great agony, exposed to the mocking of travelers, molested by flies drawn to their bloody wounds, they could only look forward to more hours and days of torment.

In unimaginable pain, both thieves also mocked Jesus. One of them burst into cries of mockery and yelled, "What kind of Savior are You? And what are these empty words about 'another life'? This is the only life I know, and I would like to live here! If You are a Savior, save Yourself and us!"

Regarding this thief, all hope was lost. He would die in his sins.

The repentant thief appeals to Jesus.

Jesus turned His eyes to the other thief.

This man, possibly an individual once baptized by John but unsteady in his repentance, in any case ended up doing many bad deeds. Finally he spoke. How Jesus must have waited to hear what he would say after hearing Jesus' prayer, "Father, forgive them." Apparently these words stirred him deeply. Turning to his mate, who was mocking, he asked, "Don't you fear God?" (Luke 23:40)

How odd this must have sounded from the mouth of a thief! This question should have been asked by the priests who were standing at the foot of the cross. But if priests are unworthy of their high calling, God raises up a priesthood from the lowly people of this world, and sometimes even from repentant thieves.

How these words must have comforted the wounded Jesus! A thief speaking about the fear of God! Scripture says, “Happy is the man who fears the Lord!” Happy—even if he is a thief.

Furthermore, the thief confesses, “It is right for us to be condemned, because we receive the just reward for our wrongdoing.”

What else does God ask but such an admission of guilt?

Jeremiah writes, “Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God, and have scattered your ways to the strangers under every green tree, and you have not obeyed my voice, says the Lord.” (Jer. 3:13)

John teaches us the same thing: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (I John 1:9) This is all God asks for: an acknowledgment of our guilt.

The scorpion is poisonous. But if the poison is extracted and mixed with certain ingredients, it becomes the antidote to a bite. The same is true of the venom of poisonous snakes. The poison in a sense becomes the cure. Likewise, when washed by the tears of repentance and confession, our forgiven sin becomes an opportunity to bond with the Savior, to whom we are forever grateful.

The thief added, “But this Man did nothing wrong.” Perhaps he was repeating the words of Pilate at Jesus’ trial. In the end, the thief turned to Jesus: “Lord, remember me when You come in Your kingdom.”

But the priests were supposed to have the keys to the kingdom. If the thief wanted to enter the kingdom, he would have been expected to speak to the priests who stood at the foot of the cross, and not to a condemned Man, crucified like himself. This is why the thief’s faith was extraordinary. He had no proof that Jesus was a king. Besides, faith never depends on proof.

The apostle Paul rightfully says that you believe with your *heart* unto righteousness. Proof has nothing to do with it. If your senses long for the things of this

world, it is easy for the mind to reject the accusations brought by God against the sins you love and to see good qualities where He sees only faults.

On the other hand, if a man does not like the things of this world and does not feel attracted to them, his mind will easily reject them.

Without proof, this thief believed that Jesus had a kingdom. He didn't question what good it would do someone to have a kingdom if he were dying on a cross. The thief was sure not only that Jesus had a kingdom, but also that death had no meaning for Him. Jesus would be resurrected. Then He would remember the thief, and He would bring him back from the dead too.

How is it that the thief believed in an afterlife, in the existence of the paradise of God? Most people do not believe in such things.

Let us imagine a conversation between a chick still in its shell and its mother. The mother says to the chick, "My dear, soon you will come out of your shell and you will see wonderful things: light, flowers, mountains, blue sky. The world is far more than what you see right now." The chick answers, "I cannot believe it, mother. I believe that there is nothing more than what I experience here, because I don't see anything that you are talking about." But one day, the shell breaks, and the chick sees that its mother was right.

Most people have the same view of eternal life that a chick has about the existence of this life. But the thief would not settle for having the mind of a chick not yet out of its shell. He believed in the life that follows when the shell of this life breaks.

Another story will make this thought even clearer.

On a warm autumn day, a young sparrow that had started flying toward a warmer climate sat on a branch of a tree to rest, tired from the journey. A thistle-finch came over and said, "Why are you so sad? You'd better come in the bush and play with the other birds."

"I am not sad," answered the swallow. "I am only tired from the journey, because I am on my way to a better country. I cannot stop here because this place will soon turn very cold and end my days."

"There is no country better than this," replied the finch. "Were you ever in a better country?"

“No, but I was told that it exists somewhere, and a voice inside me keeps telling me the same things.”

“What foolishness! To leave a beautiful country like this for a simple dream! Even the cold weather you fear is still one of your dreams. I see no warning signs. Look how beautiful it is everywhere in our country. Stay with us, dear swallow, and you will be happy.”

“Nothing can make me stay. I cannot wait to get to that country that has a warmer sun, richer fruit, and more pleasant mates. Come with me.”

Because the thistle-finch did not even want to hear about it, the swallow started off again, all alone, and journeyed to the desired country, where it landed after a tiring trip. But how happy it was in the warm rays of the sun, away from the cold and snow of the country it had left behind.

As for the thistle-finch, a few weeks after the swallow left, the bad weather swept in: cold wind, storms, snow. Hungry and shivering, it fell into the trap of a birdcatcher and then was put into a cage. There the finch spent its days, sobbing and saying, “Oh, if only I had believed the words of the swallow and heeded its advice.”

The thief was like the swallow, not the thistle-finch. What courage he demonstrated! He prayed, “You, who have a kingdom, remember me, a thief.” It was as if he were fulfilling the words later written to the Hebrews: “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” (Heb. 4:16)

At a time when everything seemed lost, the thief prayed with complete confidence. He asked a crucified King to remember a thief. And when was He supposed to remember? When He would come into His kingdom, when He would be victorious.

Forgiveness is given as a gift.

Unlike most people, the thief came to Jesus just as he was. Some people wait to feel better first. But he came with as much feeling as he had. Some people want to have the certainty they will be accepted. He came to the Savior in his desperate state, carrying

all the weight of his sins, and relied on Jesus' mercy, without any merits of his own to offer. His prayer received an immediate answer.

Jesus said to him, "Verily I say to you, today you shall be with Me in paradise."

The thief was a guilty man who did not deserve heaven. Let us learn from him that grace is reserved for the guilty, for the unworthy. Let us never imagine that we cannot receive grace because we are evil.

So Jesus' words were directed to a thief—even before His disciple John or His mother.

No one can imagine what the thief must have felt when he found himself in heaven. Only a short time before, he had been imprisoned in a foul-smelling jail, awaiting execution. Now he was forever in heaven with the angels.

Theft had been his way of living. It was in his blood. Even on the cross, he practiced his trade. Helpless, with his thieving hands nailed to a rude cross, he stole the kingdom with a simple request. His faith enabled him to receive the answer to his direct but profound request. Later, those who saw Jesus come back from the dead still did not believe, whereas the thief saw Him die and still believed in Him. He overcame all the obstacles to his faith.

The psalmist writes, "But to the wicked God says, 'What right do you have to declare My statutes, or take My covenant in your mouth, seeing you hate instruction and cast My words behind you?'" (Ps. 50:16) According to these words this thief should have kept silent when he stood up to his companion in crime. But his faith defeated the temptation to hold his tongue.

At the moment he came to his senses, he was convinced that there was forgiveness for him and that the psalmist's words were not addressed to him. Since he repented, he had faith to believe that he would share in all the promises made to God's children.

The temptation must have come to him: "What? You in heaven and those you have defrauded in hell? Do not believe these stories! This would mean that God is unjust." But the repentant thief rejected this temptation too. God receives even murderers if they turn to Him—and even the victims had time in this life, however brief, to turn to the Lord.

God's forgiveness can be obtained immediately.

The goodness of God is without limit. If someone comes to us with a request when we ourselves are in some kind of pain or trouble, do we say, "Leave me alone! I can't help you now"?

Jesus, in the torments of the cross, was willing to talk to a thief about the salvation of his soul. He could have answered, "Why should I take care of you now, when I am dying for the salvation of the entire world?" But no! The Savior of the world has time for a thief. He could have answered, "Do you, a thief, dare to think about the kingdom?" But no! God's kingdom is especially for sinners who repent.

Jesus has both love and time for him.

The Savior was not sorry that He was in such company, as we must never be sorry for the company we are thrust in, whatever it might be. But let us always try to be a blessing wherever the Lord has placed us.

Jesus chose not to remember that this thief had mocked Him only a short time before, along with the other thief. (Matt. 27:44) He gave the repentant thief more than he asked for. To his prayer "when you come" Jesus' answer was "today."

"Today!"—so soon! "With Me"—what a partnership! "In paradise"—what a resting place!

How great is God's grace! A dying man, scorned by the world, with nothing to give but his sins, still receives a place in heaven. Besides, he is the only man recorded in the New Testament about whom we know for sure that he went to heaven. A thief with God, a bandit in paradise, a wrongdoer among the blessed of the Father!

So many people who have received gifts of money or talents from the Lord have wasted them. But this man, without money, without pedigree, enters heaven.

We remember that the finest paper is made out of dirty rags. Jesus forgives the sinner in a minute, with a brief word.

In the morning this thief had been justly condemned before a human trial. Before sunset he was acquitted, forgiven, cleansed, and received by the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Sudden repentance like this should happen more often. The apostle Paul expected sinners, on entering the church, to see the secrets of their hearts revealed and to fall down and worship God. (I Cor. 14:25)

Pray honestly for your own forgiveness and that of others.

It's a fact that both thieves had prayed to the Savior. The first one had said, "If You are Christ, save Yourself and us." (Luke 23:39) When we pray, God does not look at the lips but at the heart. From the mouth of the first thief, the prayer was a mockery, but not the second. His sincerity was immediately shown by his desire to bring his mate to faith and his zeal in warning him to fear God.

There is salvation even for the greatest sinner, even in the eleventh hour.

Once, on board ship, some believers tried to talk to a young mocker about the Word of God, but since he did not want to hear of it, they left him alone. A short while later, a storm arose. All the passengers ran to find shelter in their cabins. Only this stubborn young man remained on deck to face the storm.

Suddenly, a huge wave washed him overboard. The crew were immediately notified. With great difficulty he was rescued, more dead than alive. When he came to his senses, his first word was "Jesus!" Later, when he had recovered, the believers asked him, "How come you, a mocker, whispered 'Jesus!' as soon as you were pulled out of the water?"

The prayer of repentance is heard any time. But in the Gospels we are told about only one case of repentance at the end of life, that of the thief. His example is given so that no one will lose faith. But only one instance is given, so that no one will dare to postpone the day of salvation.

Many who put off repentance never get another chance to do so in the end. The words of King Agrippa to Paul ring sadly from the pages of Scripture: "Almost you persuade me to become a Christian." (Acts 26:28)

Today is the day of salvation. Let us make sure of our salvation now, so that we will not say at the end of our lives, "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." (Jer. 8:20)

The thief's prayer was heard. It is quite possible that, as a mother in grief stood at the foot of Jesus' cross, another mother stood at the foot of the thief's cross. And this mother might have prayed for the salvation of her son.

Copernicus, founder of modern astronomy, the science about the stars, asked that these words be engraved on his tombstone: "I do not ask for the forgiveness given to the apostle Paul, nor do I hope to have the grace given to the apostle Peter. I only desire what you gave the thief on the cross."

Let this be our prayer too.

Joseph is a type of Christ.

In the Old Testament the story of Joseph bears some similarities to the story of Jesus. Like Joseph, Jesus was sold by His brothers. Like Joseph in Egypt, Jesus was imprisoned with other inmates. And just as Joseph told one that he would be free and another that he would be lost, Jesus assured one of the thieves that he would be saved, while the other would be lost.

The forgiven thief had to remain on the cross and suffer for a few more hours, though he might have survived for days. In like manner, the forgiven sinner must sometimes face on earth the consequences of his past sins. But he does so as the beloved of his heavenly Father.

The saved thief continued to suffer, just like the mocker. And so there were three people suffering terribly on Golgotha: Jesus and the two thieves. All three were tormented, all three were thirsty, all three were in terrible pain, all three endured unspeakable suffering, because a thief hurts no less than a pure man.

Though three men suffered bodily, there was a great difference among them. The mocking thief suffered like a man forsaken by God, who after the hours of torment on the cross could only look forward to the torments of hell. The repentant thief suffered as a saved man, who after a short while could look forward to the happiness of heaven. Jesus, the third crucified Man, suffered like a Person who, even in the midst of His torments, saves others.

In this world, all people suffer. There is no happy person on earth. But there are three ways of suffering: you can suffer like a forsaken man; you can suffer like a saved man; and you can suffer like a man who saves others, who brings others to Christ, even while suffering himself.

Which would you choose?

“WOMAN, BEHOLD YOUR SON!. . .BEHOLD YOUR MOTHER!”

There came the time when Mary’s heart would be pierced by a sword, as old Simeon had foretold so many years before. During the years of Jesus’ ministry as He went from place to place doing good and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, He must have thought about how His mother’s heart would bleed when He hung on the cross.

Once, approaching the gate of the city of Nain, Jesus encountered a funeral procession. A widowed mother was following the bier carrying her only son to the grave.

As He watched, Jesus had mercy on her, perhaps anticipating the grief of His own mother at His coming burial. “Don’t cry,” He said to the weeping mother. And then He brought back to life the young man from Nain.

His own mother would have no such comfort. Her Son would die, and she would see Him lowered from the cross and put into the tomb.

Usually when we picture the Lord’s mother, we imagine a young woman, the virgin with a pleasant smile, an intelligent look, uplifted eyes seeking God, a gentle demeanor, and an attitude of serenity. We think about her surprise at the salutation of the angel, about her deep feelings before giving birth, her unconfessed thoughts, her asking lips, her girlish hair, her eyelashes that hid a great secret, her shyness, her virgin purity. We see her running with light steps to Elizabeth, we hear her sighs, we have before our eyes the fine hands of a virgin that will soon caress the holy Infant.

Rightfully, this holy virgin is given by the Gospels as an example for unholy virgins of all ages, with provocative dress and seductive glance.

A factory worker once said, “In my neighborhood, the only woman known to be honest is the mother of God.” What a decline in our day! And this in spite of the fact that we know from Eve’s story that the world stands or falls by the choice of one woman.

At a time when the Roman empress was a street woman, when Salome, Herod's daughter, obtained the severed head of a prophet as the result of a shameless dance, when the walls of houses were painted with pornographic images, Christ's church began its work of healing the sick world, showing as its ideal a woman who held the Christ Child to her breast.

But now, beneath the cross there was no young virgin, but an aging woman, eyes blinded by tears, hands rough with toil.

All the disciples except John had run away. But a mother knows no fear when her child is threatened, though the terror might have been greatest at that time in Jerusalem.

Peter had denied Jesus. Another disciple had escaped naked. But Mary did not care about her life. Of what use was it now, when her beloved Son was in the throes of death? Her treasure was now hanging on the cross. Where would she sit if not here?

Watching helplessly, filled with grief over her tormented Son, she must have thought of many things during those moments of agony.

Mary at the foot of the cross remembering. . .

Mary must have remembered how the angel Gabriel had come to her. Now she was a grieving widow, but then she had been a young virgin, a jewel in Israel.

The angel bowed to her, because her calling was greater than that of the angels: "Hail, you who are highly favored, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women."

She remembered the moment that no human pen could describe when the Holy Ghost came upon her, when the power of the Almighty overshadowed her. Would she ever have imagined that her precious Child would end up being crucified between two thieves?

She must also have remembered how she and Joseph climbed up to Jerusalem after the birth of their Babe for ritual cleansing for her and Joseph. The law prescribed that the woman should bring a lamb as a sacrifice on this occasion. (Lev. 12:6) But Joseph and Mary did not have enough money to buy a lamb after the expenses of the journey and

the payment of five shekels for the redemption of their first-born Son. As poor people, they had to settle for offering to God a pair of turtledoves. (Luke 2:22-24)

How sad she must have been then! Perhaps she wept because she was not able to bring to God's altar even one lamb.

Now she tried to be calm. But it was a bitter calmness. In the end she did bring a lamb as a sacrifice, the most precious lamb of all, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. (John 1:29) That sacrificial Lamb was her Son. When Jesus was a babe, she expected all generations to call her happy. But now they all point to her as the mother of the crucified, mocked One.

In the Gospels, Jesus is described as being cradled in Mary's arms at birth and embraced in her tearful sighs at death. Regarding Mary, one can have only pious thoughts. Indeed she was blessed and was later numbered among the special group in the upper room at Pentecost. (Acts 1:13, 14)

When Jesus looked down from the cross and saw His mother, with John beside her, He said, "Woman, behold your son!"—meaning, "Take comfort, dear mother, because My disciple will love you." And to John the beloved, He said, "Behold your mother!"—meaning, "Treat Mary like a mother."

"WOMAN, BEHOLD YOUR SON!"

When Jesus said these words, He knew He was no longer of this world. His soul was far away now, in realms that flesh and blood cannot enter, where the bonds between relatives no longer exist. From an earthly viewpoint, how could anyone replace Jesus to Mary? "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?" (Isa. 49:15) Was she able, the one blessed among women, to forget the angel, the sweet months of waiting, the first day when she had put the holy Infant to her breast, the bowing of the shepherds and the wise men, the flight to Egypt, the frantic search for Jesus in the temple, all the joy and sadness that make up a mother's days, and be content from that time forward with another son?

Hardly! No one could replace Jesus in her love. Love never settles for a substitute. But by the same token, if I am a child of God, no one can replace me in His love.

But now Mary must control her motherly grief. The disciple will be her son from now on. All the disciples will honor and bless the holy mother of the Lord Jesus. She will tell them about His life at home, when Jesus helped take care of His mother's needs. Dying, He leaves this duty to the disciple who remained faithful to Him until the end.

But how is it that He did not pass this duty to one of His brothers or to a close relative? Because His brothers and relatives did not believe in Him. Let this be of comfort to us, who often talk about the unfaithfulness of our relatives. We might suspect that they have come across some sin in our lives. But Jesus led a model life, and still His relatives did not believe. (John 7:5) On one occasion they even said about Him, "He is beside Himself!" (Mark 3:21) Only after His resurrection, when He revealed Himself to His brother James, was He believed. (I Cor. 15:7)

Filled with remorse because of all the bad things he had once said about the Savior, James wrote in the epistle that bears his name, "And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defiles the whole body and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God." (Jas. 3:6-9)

Mary goes to live with John.

"And from that hour that disciple [John] took her to his own home." (John 19:27)

What fire must have been in her heart while she was going from Golgotha to John's house! Her motherly heart could not understand everything that was happening to her. It had been foretold that her first-born Son would be called the Son of the Highest, that God would give Him the throne of His father David, that He would rule over the house of Jacob, and that His kingdom would be endless. (Luke 1:32, 33) Wise men from afar had come to bow before Him as the King of the Jews. Then as an adult He had been loved by the people, who more than once even wanted to make Him king. And now, to what end? To die like a malefactor?

How can a heart not break with grief? Jesus had made it clear to the disciples that He would be resurrected. He had told them about the kingdom of heaven. He had told them that after His death He would return to the Father where He had come from. He had promised that He would send them another Comforter, the Holy Spirit. But at the last supper, when He had given those precious teachings, Mary was not present. She was destined to drink the whole cup of bitterness. She had only heard the promise made to the thief that he would be with her Son in paradise. Could she have been expected to infer the rest?

But God was going to comfort her. Suddenly, another memory must have crossed her mind: the only story told by the Gospels about Jesus' childhood, an incident that had taken place twenty years before that shed light on Jesus' mission. As a twelve-year-old child, Jesus became separated from His parents while in Jerusalem. Mary had lost Him for three days. How helpless she had felt then! But didn't He always say that He would be resurrected the *third day* after His death? Shouldn't the memory of finding the Boy after three days be of comfort to her now?

The only words we know of that were spoken by Jesus during the thirty years of His childhood until His baptism were what He said when found by His parents in the temple after they missed Him for three days and reprimanded Him for getting lost. He replied, "I must be about My Father's business." (Luke 2:49)

Mary had kept those words in her heart, and now they came back to her. It was as if a ray of the sun warmed her grieving soul. She might have said to herself, "Now I understand. He must see again about His Father's business for three days. So there is no need for me to worry and search for Him. I shall find Him again in three days."

Jesus takes care of His mother.

"And from that hour, that disciple took her to his own home."

This is what Jesus desired. He did not want His mother to witness the terrible torment He was going to go through. Later on, the apostle Paul tells about Epaphroditus, fellow worker and soldier, who had been ill, very close to death. Paul was "very sad," not

because his friend was suffering but because the brothers in Philippi had heard that he was ill. He was sorry he had upset them. (Phil. 2:25-28)

When we are suffering, let us not expect comfort from others, but let us rather think about the pain we cause them, since they suffer with us. Let us not cause even greater pain by showing our suffering.

Let us learn another lesson. Jesus, concerned on the cross with the salvation of the world, still takes care of another “small detail,” the future care of His mother. He, the Savior of the world, still has time to think about Mary and her troubles and arranges a new home for her.

Do we, involved as we are in the many cares of this world or even of God’s kingdom, have time for our mother? Do we have a kind word for our wife, our mother, and our family?

Jesus, ruler of the universe, not only had time for her but also has time for us, our homes and our troubles. He takes care of all the details that concern us.

Hudson Taylor went to China to preach the gospel to that benighted country. He had no committee to back him up, no organization to help him with money. Before he left, an old preacher reprimanded him: “It is pure madness to leave for China without being sent by an organization to back you up. Soon you will be forgotten. Your mission there will not last even for seven years.”

Taylor answered, “I have four children, and I do not need a committee to remind me of their needs and my duties toward them. I do not think that I take better care of my children than the Lord does of His children.”

So he left for China. Over one hundred fifty years have passed since then, and the mission he established still exists.

We saw the concern Jesus had regarding His mother. Won’t He then take care of each of us? He said, “Whosoever shall do the will of My Father in heaven, the same is My brother, and sister, and mother.” (Matt. 12:50) So then every believer can say with the psalmist, “I am poor and needy; yet the Lord thinks upon me.” (Ps. 40:17)

We too are loved by the Lord, just as Mary was loved. And “He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32)

There is another teaching to be learned here. Jesus' brothers were unfaithful. He could not entrust them with His mother. But why did He not entrust her to God? It is so easy for Christians to tell someone in need, "I leave you in God's care." But Jesus did not do this. He personally took care of the matter in a practical way. The same thing happens today. The Lord has established a church, His body, that His people might take care of one another's needs. He has taught us to serve each other with love and not to leave our brother's concern on God's shoulders when it is in our power to help him.

John takes Mary home with him.

John the beloved made many mistakes, even when he was a disciple of the Lord. Once he had fought with the other disciples over who was to be the greatest in Christ's kingdom. Another time, he had shown a vengeful spirit in wanting to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village. Still, Jesus rewarded him by giving him the joy of honoring His mother. What a Savior we have!

What a wonderful home John's must have been from that time forward. Now there were three people in the house: John, Salome, his mother, and Mary, the Lord's mother. What evenings they must have spent together. How many things Mary must have told about Jesus' thirty years of silence, still unrecorded in the Gospels. Even the angels must have often come to listen.

Then John must have shared many things with Mary: "Jesus told us in the last evening spent together, 'Let not your heart be troubled.' Have faith! 'In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you.' (John 14:1-3) 'He who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will manifest Myself to him.'

"He also told us that the world would rejoice when we had grief. But at the same time, He promised us that our sadness would turn into happiness, just as a woman suffers in the pain of giving birth but later forgets the suffering because of the joy of bringing a

new life into the world. His words still ring in my ears: ‘Let not your heart be troubled. If you loved Me you would rejoice.’”

With these words, John tried to assuage Mary’s pain. From now on, a special duty pressed on his shoulders: he had to replace Jesus in His mother’s life.

We also replace Jesus in our homes.

Just as John replaced Jesus for Mary, so we too replace Jesus to our parents, husbands, wives, children, to those who are above us and to those who serve us. We must also treat them as Jesus would have.

A preacher conversing with a young man took occasion to praise his sister: “How happy in the faith is your sister!” The young man responded immediately, “Except that those of us at home are not very happy about the way her faith manifests itself.”

Such a religion is not good. Paul asks believers to try to be faithful first toward those in the home and admonishes children to reward their parents’ sacrifices, because this is what God likes. (I Tim. 5:4)

Our home is often where we behave the worst, even though nowhere else are we loved so well. In the homes of believers self-love should perish. In a Christian home no one is allowed to be peevish, complaining, or quarrelsome.

Remembering John and Mary the mother of Jesus, let us try to change the atmosphere of our homes. With a little wisdom, a little more concern, they could become a foretaste of heaven.

A woman once said, “My husband is the man most like God that I have ever met.” How nice it would be if men would try to look upon their wives in this way!

What do our homes look like? If we lived in John’s day, would Jesus have been able to entrust us with His mother? Would He have found our home suitable for her? Well, if He did not entrust His mother to us, He entrusted us, instead, with our mother, father, wife, children. Let us resolve to be their comfort and joy.

To the beloved disciple, aside from the duty of preaching the gospel, Jesus also assigned the duty of taking care of His aging mother. No believer should be sad if his

duties to his family seem to tie his hands and prevent him from entering the Lord's work, because he is exactly where the Lord wants him.

Jesus expects him to take care of his family, serving the Lord inside his home as well as out in the world.

Who is my mother?

The son of many mothers is a faithful soul. The first mother was Eve, because “she was the mother of all living.” (Gen. 3:20) From her we have inherited the body redeemed by the Lord.

Then every true Israelite has Sarah for a mother. Abraham, honored because he believed God, is called in Scripture “the father of us all” (Rom. 4:16), which makes Sarah our mother. And in heaven we have another mother: the heavenly Jerusalem that awaits us. This is our third mother.

Then, we all have our own mother: the one who gave us birth and toward whom our love and honor are directed. Some of us may have a mother in the faith, a woman who led our steps on the path to the Savior.

But still we are the sons of many other “mothers”: sons of wisdom (Luke 7:35), or peace (Luke 10:6), of light (Luke 16:8), of the resurrection (Luke 20:36), of promise (Gal. 4:28), of the kingdom (Matt. 13:38), of the day (I Thess. 5:5). So, all told, we have twelve mothers!

How much care and gentleness come from one mother! But as we have seen we have more than one. And they all give us daily their love and caresses.

“ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?—MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”

On the cross, Jesus, in His terrible cry spoken in Aramaic, considered Himself forsaken by God. How was this possible?

The psalmist wrote, “I have been young and now I am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken.” (Ps. 37:25) Jesus, righteousness personified—forsaken? It is difficult to understand. Fear grips you at the very thought. Jesus is forsaken, even though obeying

God's command. He left heaven and came to earth. He left His treasures and became poor for us. He left His glory and the beauty of heaven to go from place to place preaching the gospel and doing good.

And now He feels Himself forsaken. Earlier He said, "The Father has not left Me alone; for I always do those things that please Him." (John 8:29) So why has the Father abandoned Him now? Has He fallen from God's grace? "I have kept My Father's commandments and I remain in His love." This too He said just the night before, at the last supper. (John 14:10) And now that terrible cry!

In the entire Bible there is no other phrase more difficult to explain. Bishop Ryle came to this conclusion: "There is a deep mystery in these words that no man can understand. They express the real pressure on His soul put by the enormous burden of the world's sin." It is the most surprising phrase ever uttered by man. There is so much helplessness in it.

As sinners accustomed to living without God for years on end, we have in our mind and heart all sorts of things to replace Him. Unfortunately, many of us have succeeded so well that some people can reach the end of their lives without ever once having a broken heart at the thought of being forsaken by the Lord. All kinds of idols, ideals, tastes, politics, arts, greed, amusements, and passions have replaced Him. But for Jesus, God is everything. Forsaken by His Father, He felt lost in this world. He owned nothing in it. In those moments He had become again a helpless child.

The following explanation of Jesus' cry is worth considering: His words, given in Aramaic, are incorrect. They should have begun, "Eloi" (See Mark 15:34) and not "Eli." (Matt. 27:46) "Eloi" is "My God" in the Aramaic language.

It appears that Matthew's Gospel, written in Greek, necessarily wants the reader to know that Jesus used an incorrect Aramaic word, "Eli," and not "Eloi," as would have been correct. That is why, translating the cry into Greek, he uses "The-e! The-e!" instead of "Theos," which would have been correct.

This is why Matthew explains that the people standing around the cross did not understand His words and thought He was crying for Elias (Elijah). In this dark hour, Jesus' speech became again the insecure speech of a child. He was like a small boy around Mary's apron, who says after her, with mistakes, a word only half-learned.

Jesus was helpless as a child when He knew Himself forsaken by God. All the strength and eloquence of His speech disappeared.

In the year 1892, an old book called *St. Peter's Gospel* was published. It was written at the beginning of the second century. We do not find in it the words "My God, My God," but "My Power, My Power, why have You forsaken Me?" So this is how many of the first disciples saw things. Knowing Himself to be forsaken by God, Jesus' divine power vanished. Now, hanging from the cross, there was only a poor man, anxious for the release of death, because, since God had forsaken Him, everything was lost.

What a powerful temptation must have been this terrible feeling of loneliness that surrounded Jesus at that time!

The Lord said to Moses, "This people will forsake Me, and break My covenant which I have made with them. Then, My anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them." And then He added, "They shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them; so that they will say in that day, Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us?" (Deut. 31:16-18)

Is it possible for temptation not to have come to Jesus in the moments He knew Himself forsaken? Is it possible that deep in His soul there were similar questions?

The meaning of this word

Whoever wants to convince himself about the truth of Scripture should read this verse. Had it not been for their enormous love of truth, the disciples would have been most reluctant to tell us about Jesus uttering such a cry.

Usually we try to enhance the last hours of our friends' lives by saying only good things about the dead. But the disciples wrote things as they actually happened, even if for countless people this cry remains impossible to understand.

Jesus cried out those words in a "loud voice." In His agony on the cross He wanted it to be known that He was forsaken by God. By contrast, we speak about the moments when we are close to God and we brag about them. Jesus cried out loud, "I am forsaken by God." And the apostles reported this accurately.

It is known that the first Gospels were written by Matthew and Mark; the Gospels according to Luke and John were written much later. It is amazing that of all the seven words spoken by Jesus on the cross only the first Gospels record this one, and only this one: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

For years, then, before the other two Gospels were written, the Church had no other words spoken by Jesus on the cross. The Holy Spirit inspired the first writers of the Gospels to record only this one, as if it contained the most important discovery of Jesus in His torment at His death.

Why did Jesus cry out like this?

A believer often keeps to himself his deepest feelings lest his sighs upset or sadden those around him. Jesus too must have had this burden. Then how is it He did not keep this pain inside Himself? Why did He allow His grief to be heard, expressing it with such a loud cry for everyone to hear?

Certainly, the effect of this cry must have been very powerful. The mocking priests and mob surrounding the cross heard it and said, “He believed in God. Let God free Him now, if He loves Him!” How they must have gloated when they heard from Jesus’ lips the words, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” They concluded that they had been right all along in claiming that He was an impostor. “Look, He admits it now. He Himself says that He is forsaken by God.”

If this was an occasion of joy for Jesus’ enemies, for John this cry must have been a terrible disappointment. How could he believe his ears?

Worse yet, what must the repentant thief have felt when he heard this cry? A beginner in matters of faith, he must have sensed these words as a body blow! He had asked Jesus for a place in the kingdom, trusting that He was the Messiah, God’s chosen One. But this Man confesses with His own mouth that He is forsaken by God. So what good does it do the thief to believe that he had obtained the promise of heaven? If Jesus is forsaken by God, then the thief too is forsaken.

This cry broke John’s heart, broke the thief’s heart, and brought joy only to Satan’s hosts.

Was Jesus forsaken by God?

Jesus always spoke as He thought. And since His every thought was subject to God's command, when He said these words He spoke, as on all other occasions, what the Father would have Him speak. He had said, "I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father has taught Me, I speak these things." (John 8:28) "For I have not spoken of Myself; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak. . . Whatever I speak, therefore, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak." (John 12:49, 50)

So Jesus told the truth. On the cross, He really was forsaken by God.

But why was He forsaken? The answer is that Jesus took upon Himself the sin of the world. Because of His holy nature, God has hatred for sin, and sinners who cling to their sins and reject His mercy fall under His condemnation.

Scripture talks much about this hatred. A portion from Jeremiah is typical: "Then the Lord said to me, 'Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My mind could not be favorable toward this people. Cast them out of My sight, and let them go forth. And it shall come to pass, if they say to you, "Where shall we go forth?" then you shall tell them, "Thus says the Lord: 'Such as are for death, to death; and such as are for the sword, to the sword; and such as are for the famine, to the famine; and such as are for the captivity, to the captivity.'" And I will appoint over them four forms of destruction,' says the Lord: 'the sword to slay, the dogs to drag, the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy. I will hand them over to trouble, to all kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, for what he did in Jerusalem.

"For who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem? Or who will bemoan you? Or who will turn aside to ask how you are doing? You have forsaken Me,' says the Lord. 'You have gone backward. Therefore I will stretch out My hand against you and destroy you; I am weary of relenting! And I will winnow them with a winnowing fan in the gates of the land; I will bereave them of children; I will destroy My people, since they do not return from their ways. Their widows will be increased to Me more than the sand of the seas; I

will bring against them, against the mother of the young men, a plunderer at noonday; I will cause anguish and terror to fall on them suddenly. She languishes who has borne seven; she has breathed her last; her sun has gone down while it was yet day; she has been ashamed and confounded. And the remnant of them I will deliver to the sword before their enemies,' says the Lord." . . . "Your wealth and your treasures I will give as plunder without price, because of all your sins, throughout your territories. And I will make you cross over with your enemies into a land which you do not know; for a fire is kindled in My anger, which shall burn upon you." (Jer. 15:1-9, 13, 14)

Now when Jesus took upon Himself our sins, they became, in essence, His own. Just as in the Old Testament the sacrificial lamb was named *asham*, meaning "sin," because the sinner's guilt was put upon it, so Jesus was made sin for us. (II Cor. 5:21)

We see this in Psalms 40 and 69. Both are prophetic and are about the Savior. The first is quoted in Hebrews (10:5-7), and the second is quoted five times in the New Testament as speaking about Jesus.

In Psalm 40, the same person, meaning the Savior, who says, "I come; in the volume of the book it is written of Me," also says, "For innumerable evils have compassed Me about; My iniquities have overtaken Me, so that I am not able to look up. They are more than the hairs of My head; therefore my heart fails Me." (40:12) And in Psalm 69, the same person, meaning the Messiah, who says "the zeal of Your house has eaten Me up," also says, "O God, You know My foolishness, and My sins are not hid from You." (69:5)

Our wrongdoings, more than the hairs of the head, our madness and our mistakes, Jesus took upon Himself and made them His. For His spirit it was an unfathomable condescension to be burdened by evil, by the sin of the whole world. Still, He carried the burden of our sin till the end.

The result was that he was forsaken by the heavenly Father, about whom it is written, "Your eyes are so clean that they can see no evil and cannot look upon wrongdoing! How could You watch the rascal and keep silent?" (Hab. 1:13)

The deep sorrow

Being forsaken by the Father was the cup Jesus refused in the garden of Gethsemane, when He agonized in prayer. For Him, the suffering of being separated from God was far more bitter than the suffering inflicted on Him physically. Of His persecutors, He was able to say, “Father forgive them; for they know not what they do.” But God’s punishment for sin was what evoked this terrible cry.

Something mysterious took place on the cross. All we know is what Isaiah records: “Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. . . He bore the iniquities of many people. . . He has poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors; and He bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.” (Isa. 53:10-12)

The Savior’s agonized cry shows how terrible is the weight of sin. If Jesus, the Son of God, was forsaken by the heavenly Father when He took sin upon Himself, how will we escape? Let us be careful not to lose our partnership with God by indulging in sin.

Because Jesus was made sin for us, He was forsaken by God. In this way He fulfilled what He had told the Jews: that they would be given the sign of Jonah. When in the fish’s belly, Jonah cried to God, “I am cast out of Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.” (Jonah 2:4) In like manner, Jesus, in the throes of death, responded to His abandonment, but He came out of the grave victorious and ascended to heaven shortly afterward.

Only a few moments

Jesus’ experience of being forsaken by God actually did not last long. Again Isaiah writes, “For a small moment I have forsaken You, but with great mercies will I gather You.” (Isa. 54:7)

This was needed for the redemption of our sins. Jesus, the pure One, took upon Himself the suffering of being forsaken by God in order that you, the sinner, might never be forsaken. He said, “I will never leave you, nor forsake you.” (Heb. 13:5) He promised us, “And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.” (Matt. 28:20) And Paul wrote, “We are persecuted, but not forsaken; thrown down, but not killed.” (II Cor. 4:9)

Sometimes we may think we are really forsaken, but we are fooling ourselves. When Zion says, “The Lord has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me,” God’s answer is, “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yes, they may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you upon the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before Me.” (Isa. 49:14-16) God does not forget the children He has given birth to.

No, we are no longer forsaken, because He was forsaken in our place. The problem is that when you feel forsaken by God, even if only for a few minutes, you do not see the end. These moments seem like forever. That was why Jesus’ cry was so heart-rending, because it revealed, in a surprising way, the difference between what a man feels and his actual state. Jesus, racked with pain, exhausted, spat upon, rejected, felt like a man forsaken forever. Yet on the cross, “God was in Christ.” (II Cor. 5:19) Actually, God was closer to Him than ever, even though, because of our sin, He was hidden briefly from His eyes and Jesus felt completely abandoned.

Let this be a lesson to us. Let us not trust our feelings. Let us not be hopeless if we do not feel the Lord close, but let us *believe* that He is with us, His children, until the end of time.

‘I THIRST!’

“Today you shall be with Me in paradise”—only Jesus could have made such a promise.

“Why have You forsaken Me”—Jesus had to utter these words in our stead so that we would never be forsaken.

“I thirst”—this is a cry we could all repeat, because we all have a body. In this respect Jesus was like us. His body also knew pain and suffering and thirst. That is why we do not have in Him a high priest who would not have mercy on our weaknesses, but one who in all things was just as tempted as we are. We can approach His throne with full confidence to receive grace. (Heb. 4:15)

In Hebrew, the language Jesus spoke, heaven is called *shamaim*, meaning the place of the waters. The psalmist says, “There is a river, the streams of which shall make

glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.” (Ps. 46:4) From that city, made happy by a river, Jesus came.

In the book of Revelation, John writes of a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. (Rev. 22:1) From eternity Jesus had been sitting on that throne. And now, on earth, helpless, impaled on a tree, He thirsts for a few drops of water!

Jesus had an abundance of water to heal the thirst of every human soul. Ages before, He called people to Him with the words, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and you who have no money, come. . .” (Isa. 55:1) In His conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well, He said, “Anyone who drinks from this fountain will be thirsty again. But anyone who drinks from the water I give him will never be thirsty. And the water I shall give him will turn into a fountain of water inside him springing up into everlasting life.” (John 4:13, 14)

Now He who was the Source of living water hangs from the cross, dry-mouthed, hardly able to speak. Because of the blood He had lost, His thirst must have been terrible. Great is the torment of a thirsty person! He thinks he hears rivers. He feels that water must be dripping nearby. Jesus must have expected water to come down from *shamaim*, from His heaven, to cool Him. But everything is only illusion. The springs, the rivers, the waters are now far away. Here is only endless torment.

Jesus took everything upon Himself—all our sins, all our failures, all our iniquities. We all deserve death and hell. But He, wanting to bring a redemptive sacrifice, had to endure all the torments I deserved, had to pay the whole price for my sins. So He was tormented by thirst in my place, in order that I, a sinner, may avoid the penalty of hell because He suffered the fire in my place.

“For it became Him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through suffering.” (Heb. 2:10)

Is God to blame?

People often blame God for all the evils in the world. Most of the time things are so complicated that it's hard to exculpate God. But now we have before us a simple case. Jesus, thirsty on the cross, is God's answer to all the accusations brought against Him.

Certainly God has provided enough water for everyone's needs. But according to Scripture, the Jews and Samaritans would not even give each other a glass of water to drink. In the Orient, powerful people took over the fountains and springs and used them to make a living. In wartime, armies would poison the wells in their retreat.

And now, even worse, God's own Son was left to suffer thirst. So who is to blame for all the evil in the world? Where lies God's fault? After all, He provided plenty of water.

Another thirst

When Jesus cried, "I thirst!" the soldiers gave Him vinegar, the sour wine of the Roman soldiers, thus fulfilling the prophecy in Psalm 69:21: "For My thirst they gave Me vinegar to drink," that we might receive living water. Now He accepts the drink He refused before being nailed to the cross, at the same time giving the soldiers the opportunity of doing a good deed. This was the sign that His work was done and that the last sin had been redeemed.

Jesus had another thirst that the Roman soldiers could not quench, the thirst for human souls brought into harmony with His Father. Today Jesus still cries out, "I thirst!" Let us answer this cry by giving ourselves to Christ, by giving Him our whole life.

And then let us respond with our own thirst as described by the psalmist: "As the heart pants after the water brooks, so pants my soul after You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" (Ps. 42:1, 2)

"IT IS FINISHED!"

When Jesus cried aloud "It is finished!" He uttered the most decisive word ever spoken. The vinegar had moistened His dry throat. The soldiers' kindness made it easier for Jesus' victory cry: "*Kala!*"—"It is finished!" in Aramaic.

Implicit in the word *kala*, or the Greek *teleo*, which we find in the New Testament as it was written in the beginning, is the idea that a thing is ripe, that it is a success, a triumph.

Jesus could rightfully say, “I have finished the work that You gave Me to do.” (John 17:4)

What is finished?

Jesus’ earthly life is finished, a life of complete obedience to God. He had done everything the Father asked Him to do; He had said everything the Father ordered Him to say. All the prophecies in the Old Testament regarding His life in poverty were fulfilled. Everything He had come to accomplish on this earth was finished.

He was ending His human existence without regrets. At peace with Himself, He was able to look back on His entire life without a troubled conscience. No talent, no gift of God was left unused or had been misused. No one had been injured by one of His words. He was rightfully able to say about any moment of His life, “I always do the things that please God. . . My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me.” (John 4:34) Since God knows best what things are useful to us, Jesus knew it was wise to listen to Him and trust Him completely.

Our reconciliation with God is finished. We are not obliged to try hard to be reconciled with God. Everything is done. All we have to do is believe. Since Jesus rose from the dead, God confirmed that His redeeming sacrifice was accepted and that we are now considered righteous.

Our salvation is finished. The angel told Joseph to call Mary’s Son Jesus, “for He shall save His people from their sins.” (Matt. 1:21) The Son of Man came to the world “to seek and to save that which was lost,” giving “His life as a ransom for many.” (Luke 19:10; Mark 10:45) Now His life was ending. Only a few moments separated Him from death. Redemption was assured; our salvation was obtained. “It is finished!”

God’s revelation is finished. Jesus said, “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father.” As His life drew to a close, His revelation of the Father was completed. People had seen and heard everything they needed to know about the Father. As long as we are

on this earth no one can add to the knowledge of God. The Holy Spirit promised to believers does not teach new things but reveals to us what Jesus has given Him. (John 16:14)

Everything that is needed for our lives is finished. Jesus had said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10) Once His life ended on the cross, eternal life came within the reach of all. We need only accept it.

Jesus came to give us eternal life. This is what we were created to enjoy from the beginning. Now we are assured that “we have a building from God, a house not made with hands [but] eternal in the heavens.” (II Cor. 5:1-5) Now that Jesus’ work is finished, we can enter into life eternal.

Through His unique sacrifice, sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world, He once for all obtained eternal redemption for us. Through His death, He opened the heavenly kingdom to all believers. Everything has been done so that we can receive God’s gift of eternal life. What does it require on our part? Do we ever purchase a gift?

It is certain that you cannot obtain eternal life for money. You cannot obtain it with your deeds either, or with much knowledge. Understanding theology is not enough to qualify for it, or the devil would also be saved.

Eternal life is a *gift* and must be received as such, *through faith*. “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the power to become the sons of God, even to them who believe on His name.” (John 1:12)

The twelve gates

It is difficult to find in one single family so much evil, so much sin, as among the twelve sons of Jacob.

Reuben, the firstborn, was a profligate. Simeon and Levi misled with pleasant words and then murdered all the inhabitants of a city. Eleven of the brothers schemed and arranged for the murder of their brother Joseph. They gave up their criminal plans only when Judah asked, “What do we gain out of this?” That got their attention. They would

not kill someone if they gained nothing. So they decided to sell Joseph as a slave, lying to their father that his favorite son had been torn apart by a wild beast.

As these eleven would-be murderers stayed with their father, they watched him tear his clothes in sorrow and saw him hold the bloodstained coat in his hands. For years they knew of his terrible grief and came to comfort him with empty words. But none of them were moved to alleviate Jacob's pain by telling him that Joseph was in truth alive. None of them confessed the sin, not even when Jacob lay dying.

Such people deserve to end up in hell. But—surprise!—they are not in hell, they are in paradise. Moreover, they are given great honor: The New Jerusalem had twelve gates “and names written on them.” (Rev. 21:12) Whose names are written there? The names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Joseph, and so on.

But, you ask, how can heaven be opened to sinners, to murderers? The answer is that heaven is precisely for them. Any sinner, even any murderer, who repents has eternal life. No one need lose hope of entering heaven because he has committed grave sins.

You may have reached the same state as the man described in I Corinthians 5, but if you repent and believe in Jesus' sacrifice in your stead, you can enter the New Jerusalem. My advice to you is to enter the gate with the name “Reuben” on it. Have you killed anyone or even murdered a whole city? You have a choice of entering the heavenly Jerusalem by two gates: those with the names “Simeon” and “Levi.” Have you been dishonest or greedy for money in your desire to make a fortune? Even if you stepped over bodies to achieve your aim, there is forgiveness for you as well. Just repent and enter the New Jerusalem through the gate inscribed “Judah.” Have you hated your own brother and plotted against him? If you repent, you can be happy. Eleven gates are open to you.

“It is finished!” The gates of heaven are now wide open for sinners. No one can keep you from obtaining eternal life. Only you can decide to remain outside. Only your unfaithfulness is to blame if you are not saved.

“It is finished!” Because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross, you can receive not only life, but a more abundant life. In fact, you can always receive new gifts from God. Take them! Serve God, the supreme Giver of every perfect gift. (Jas. 1:17)

In the not-too-distant future, the cry “It is finished!” will again be heard. Then the voice will rock not only the earth but also the heavens. And then the sinner who has not repented will receive not the mercy but the wrath of God.

When the seventh plague angel emerges from the heavenly temple and pours out his bowl on the earth, a loud voice from the throne will say, “It is finished!” Again there will be lightning and thunder and a great earthquake, greater than anything that has gone before. (Rev. 16:17, 18)

One final thought about the sixth word of Jesus on the cross: “It is finished!” Undoubtedly this word was spoken by Jesus in the Aramaic language. The word is *Kala*, which in the well-known Aramaic language of the Old Testament also means “bride.”

Who can say if the Savior, who knew in advance everything that was going to happen and who by faith saw before His eyes the great multitude cleansed by His precious blood, might not have comforted His heart and addressed to them this cry of sweet love.

Kala—our salvation is finished. *Kala*—”Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth.” (Song of Solomon 2:10-12) Yes, *Kala*—my bride, the time of singing is here!

What a beautiful thought. It makes our heart jump for joy over this beloved Groom, who in His most difficult moment thinks only about the happiness of His bride, who will love Him more than anything.

How can we fail to respond to such love? Is there any sacrifice too great to make to spend eternity with such a Lover? Who shall separate us from His love? St. Paul responds to that question with passion: “For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 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.” (Rom. 8:38, 39)

“FATHER, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMEND MY SPIRIT!”

The most important thing a man can know is whether there is eternal life.

What is man's purpose on earth? Our earth is just a tiny planet in a universe with uncounted billions of sun and stars. On this little earth, we live our short lives. Compared to the thousands of years people have existed and will exist, our life is but for a moment. We are like "the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven." (Matt. 6:30) But is there nothing after this?

Everything depends on the answer to this question, including behavior. If nothing follows, then let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. But if there is eternal life, nothing is more important for man than to know if his soul is mortal or immortal. If you believe in eternal life and there is no such thing, you have lost nothing on this earth. But if you reject the idea of eternal life and it does exist, you lost not only hope in this world but a glorious future in the world to come.

What a misfortune if there is eternal life and you have not prepared for it!
How can the Gospels enlighten us in this regard?

There is life after death.

We must consider the fact that none of the writers of the Gospels say that Jesus died but only that "He yielded up His spirit." For Him the terror of death had perished. After His death He was resurrected and He returned to the Father.

Jesus died with confidence in His heavenly Father: "Into Your hands I commit my spirit"—a prayer many pray today when they go to bed. Jesus died. Mary died. All the saints have died. There is no reason for me not to be ready to die. When you die, something remains with you: the spirit, which you can entrust to God.

Since Jesus returned to heaven, no child of God has died, in the ultimate sense of the word, but has only fallen asleep. This is what is written about Stephen: "He fell asleep." (Acts 7:60)

"Cemetery" is from a Greek word meaning to rock a baby to sleep. If such a word is used for Christian burial, it is because it is simply a bedroom for God's children. There they lie quietly till the morning. With this assurance, many saints have fallen asleep with Jesus' last words on their lips: "Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit!" No doubt

this explains why in the early Christian churches people would say to the dying, “Good night! We shall see each other again in the morning.”

The spirit does not remain dead. “Christ, . . . being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit.” (I Pet. 3:18) In death, the spirit is separated from the body only for a while. Jesus yielded up His life to take it again, just like our beloved who have died. Their spirits are alive and they are with Him.

The voice of science

When they hear this, skeptics always ask, “But has anyone ever come back from the grave to tell us that there is another life?”

The answer to this question is simple. Let us assume that we could speak to a baby still in the womb of its mother and that we could tell it about another life that follows the one it is living right now, a life in a new world, with flowers and sunshine, rivers and mountains. The baby inside its mother’s womb would surely answer, “Has anyone ever come back from there? How can I know that another life follows this one? This is all I know, the life that I am living here. What you are telling me about a new life is only a fairy tale.”

How could you convince this child that the life he is now living inside the womb is not everything, but only a short preparation for another life, richer and longer? Perhaps he would realize that he has eyes. For what? Where he is now, there is darkness. If he has eyes, it certainly means that another world follows, with light, many colors, and things to see. He has growing hands. But where he is the space is limited; he cannot even stretch his arms. Why would these hands be growing? It must be that another world follows in which hands will be needed for work. Feet are growing as well, but he can only keep his legs bent. Why would they be growing? He does not need them in his mother’s womb. But if they are growing stronger, it is because another life follows, in which he will have a long way to walk and run.

For the baby inside his mother’s womb it would be enough to think about his own life in order to reach the sure conclusion that another life follows. Of course, the unborn child does not yet know how to think.

But adults suffer from the same inability to think. They ask if someone has returned from the other side, instead of thinking about the life they lead now, which would be impossible to understand if nothing followed death. All the work, all the knowledge, all the love, all the activity, all the concerns of this life would be pointless. Why strive for success or seek the meaning of life if everything is over when you die?

In the animal world there are worms that can be cut in pieces. But if the worm is left with only a head, it will grow another body. In a sense the life of the creature is destroyed, but God gives the worm the power to regain its full life.

Spiders shed their skin every year. In this change, called metamorphosis, sometimes the spider experiences the loss of a leg. But God's power fixes everything: the leg grows back again.

Science tells us that our human body is made up of millions of tiny cells. These cells are constantly replaced with others as we get older; in this way, the human body is completely renewed every seven years. A person thirty-five years old has changed his body five times. Yet his soul, his spirit, his inner "I" has remained the same. My soul has changed bodies in the past and will change again in the future. But in all these changes, the essential "I" remains unchanged. So it does not depend on the body and will not die with the body.

There is eternal life. I am confident of this, as the birds in our land know that there are warmer countries they have never seen, to which they will fly in the fall. Their bird-heart tells them where to go. They believe, and their belief is true.

Christ wins.

When Jesus faced the moment when the spirit is separated from the body, the moment we will all go through, He kept His firm belief that at death not everything is finished. He had told His disciples not to fear those who kill the body but are unable to do anything afterwards. What kind of "afterwards" is there when you are dead? What Jesus meant was that enemies can murder you, but they cannot prevent an "afterwards" from following.

With this belief deep inside His heart, Jesus could laugh in a godly way at His enemies. Everything had been taken away from Him on the cross, even the clothes He was wearing. His disciples had left Him. Naked and despised, He “yielded up His spirit.”

In this moment, Jesus seems to be asking His enemies at the foot of the cross, “Did you take everything away from Me?” And they say in triumph, “Yes, we took everything. We won. You have nothing left.”

Jesus looks down at them again: “Think well: didn’t you leave Me something? Did you really take everything away from Me?”

They watch Him, victorious. “Yes, we defeated You. We took everything, really everything.”

And then Jesus says to them, “Well, then, if you took everything, listen to Me: ‘Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit!’”

What a disappointment for His enemies! They thought they had taken everything away from Him, but they forgot in their anger the one thing they couldn’t take away: His spirit.

Today, believers can lose everything. The Church can be trampled underfoot. But after Jesus’ enemies have fulfilled all their desires, there is one thing that they can neither reach nor move: the eternal throne on which Christ sits.

The storms may howl and His enemies may seethe, but Christ has won!

HE IS VICTORIOUS FOREVER!